

METONYMY AS A COGNITIVE MECHANISM IN THE FORMATION OF PHRASEOLOGICAL MEANING: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ENGLISH AND UZBEK

Mustafaev Elyor Odil ugli,

Independent Researcher at Andijan State Institute of Foreign Languages

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-1997-1196>

Abstract. This paper examines conceptual metonymy as a cognitive process that contributes to meaning creation in the phraseology of English and Uzbek. In traditional linguistics, metonymy is usually described as a semantic mechanism motivated by proximity between entities. By contrast, conceptual metonymy is defined as a process in which a salient aspect of a cognitive domain serves as an access point to another aspect within the same domain. This perspective is particularly appropriate for phraseological units, whose figurative meanings are typically grounded in embodied experience, culture, and conventional conceptual structures. In this study, a qualitative comparative approach is adopted, and several verbal phraseological units in English and Uzbek are analysed in terms of the metonymic relationships that underlie their meanings. The analysis compares the manifestations of metonymy in English and Uzbek verbal phraseological units, highlighting their shared and language-specific cognitive and semantic characteristics.

Keywords: conceptual metonymy, phraseological meaning, verbal phraseological unit, cognitive mechanism, metaphonymy

Introduction

Phraseological units hold a unique place in the lexico-semantic structure of a language since there may be no possibility of explaining the meanings of such units by means of the summing up the dictionary meanings of their separate elements. However, non-compositionality of the meaning of an idiom in question does not presuppose its arbitrariness in any way. In terms of cognitive linguistics, many figures of speech are motivated from the semantic point of view by universal regularities of human conceptualization and embodied experience. For instance, Gibbs considers figurative thinking to be an inherent part of cognition (Gibbs, 1994).

In this regard, metaphor and metonymy have especially gained importance as mechanisms that help in accounting for the conceptual grounding of linguistic meaning. The cognitive approach to the study of metaphors and metonymies proposed by Lakoff and Johnson has made an invaluable contribution to the study of the nature

of figurative language as a structure of thinking rather than just rhetoric (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). While the concept of the conceptual metaphor has been studied more extensively in the research on figurative language, metonymy is just as important for the structuring of meaning.

Metonymy, as defined by Radden and Kövecses, represents “the mental process by which a vehicle entity makes an individual think about a target entity both in the same idealized cognitive model” (Radden & Kövecses, 1999). Thus, the authors’ definition of the concept goes far beyond the traditional view that metonymy consists of mere substitution of linguistic units. In the same manner, Langacker’s reference-point model suggests the possibility of using a salient entity as a means of accessing another entity, which is less accessible from the conceptual perspective (Langacker, 1993).

This change in perspective on metonymy is especially significant for phraseology. Expressions like “lose one’s head”, “give someone a hand”, “open one’s heart”, Uzbek “boshini yo‘qotmoq” – “to lose one’s head”, “qo‘l uzatmoq” – “to extend a hand/help”, and “ko‘nglini ochmoq” – “to open one’s heart” include concrete bodily components in their structures; however, the meaning of the expressions in question has nothing to do with the bodily elements, as it refers to the control of one’s mind, help, emotions, and interpersonal relations.

The recent studies on Uzbek have also viewed metaphor and metonymy from a cognitive point of view, thus showing how culturally organized conceptual structure affects such linguistic processes. In particular, the study by Khakimova and Rahmatova of cognitive metaphor and metonymy in Uzbek focuses on the role played by national conceptual structures in semantic processing (Khakimova & Rahmatova, 2025). The study on scenario metonymy in Uzbek has also proven how one part of the scenario can activate the whole culturally familiar event (Muzaffarova, 2025).

In this context, the current study is focused on the investigation of the role played by conceptual metonymy in the motivation of phraseological meaning in English and Uzbek and on establishing the major similarities and differences in metonymic motivation of verbal phraseological units in the studied languages. Furthermore, it will try to find out how metonymic motivation is related to metaphorical extension when both processes work together.

Conceptual Metonymy and Phraseological Meaning

Traditional definitions define metonymy as the exchange of names based on the contiguity between entities that can be spatial, causal, temporal, functional, etc. While such an explanation works for the description of the semantic connection between linguistic terms, it does not account for why certain entities can represent others cognitively.

Metonymy, according to cognitive linguistics, is concerned not with the substitution of lexemes, but rather with the possibility of conceptual access to them. Metonymy, according to Radden and Kövecses, can be defined in terms of Idealized Cognitive Models and includes such metonymy-generating conceptual relations as “Part For Whole, Whole For Part, Instrument For Action, Agent For Action, Result For Action,” and similar relationships.

It is significant for the study of phraseology as an idiom may retain the concrete lexical picture while its figurative meaning is abstract. Metonymy is capable of explaining the process of transformation of the concept from the concrete element to the figurative one.

Take for example the English idiom “give someone a hand”. The literal meaning of this idiom relates to the physical hand. Phraseological meaning is “to help someone”. Semantic change may be presented in the following way:

HAND → PHYSICAL ACTION → ASSISTANCE

The hand is the most important instrument of the body in performing various actions. As a result, the hand takes on significance as an important point of reference in human action. This embodiment leads to the emergence of the metonymic concept of HAND FOR ACTION/HELP. In this case, the meaning of “help” is motivated, not arbitrary.

Analogous to the above example, we have “qo‘l uzatmoq” “to stretch the hand; to help” in Uzbek. Here “qo‘l” “hand” acts as the source of the concept of the action performed by the hand, as well as the help offered to another person. The likeness between the two units indicates that bodily experience leads to analogous concepts in different languages.

Metonymic motivation, however, should not be interpreted as requiring complete semantic transparency. Once a phraseological unit becomes conventionalized, speakers may process its idiomatic meaning directly. The cognitive analysis concerns the conceptual structure that motivates the relation between the lexical image and the conventional meaning, rather than claiming that speakers consciously reconstruct the metonymic chain every time the idiom is used.

Metonymic Models in English and Uzbek Verbal Phraseological Units

One of the most apparent lexical correspondences is that between English “head” and Uzbek “bosh”. As the head houses the brain and is traditionally perceived as the site of thought, reasoning, consciousness, and control, it may serve as a metonymic anchor of mind activity. The English phrase “use one’s head” refers to careful thinking or intelligent behavior. The conceptual link between the concrete physical organ and the abstract ability may be illustrated as:

HEAD FOR MIND/INTELLECT

A corresponding expression in Uzbek language is:

“boshini ishlatmoq” – “to use/work one’s head” (literally), “to think, to be intelligent” (figuratively).

The correspondence is highly important as there is conceptual similarity between the source lexeme and verbal construction.

A more complicated example is “lose one’s head”, which means ‘to lose self-control’. Uzbek “boshini yo‘qotmoq” conveys almost the same meaning. In the first step, “HEAD FOR MENTAL CONTROL” constitutes a metonymic connection. Nevertheless, the whole figurative expression can be read metaphorically:

SELF-CONTROL LOSS IS BODILY PARTS LOSS.

Therefore, metonymy establishes the “head/bosh” link with the cognitive process itself, whereas metaphor encodes the loss of such processes as the loss of a certain physical feature. These cases show why the semantic structure of an idiom cannot be always described by a single figure of speech.

HAND/QO‘L as Metonym of Action, Help and Agency

There is another fruitful metonymic relation between the hand and the activity of humans. “Give someone a hand” in English is an example of “HAND FOR HELP/ACTION”, mentioned above. There is another phrase “have a hand in something” meaning to participate in or to contribute to some action. In this case, the hand is the way of access not only to physical action but to human agency. There are similar conceptual links in Uzbek. In “qo‘l uzatmoq”, the visible act of extending the hand evokes the social action of helping the other person. The phrase is based on the experience where physical help is associated with the movement of the hand.

The following scheme can illustrate this concept:

HAND/QO‘L → ACTION → HELP/PARTICIPATION

Parallelism does not imply linguistic equivalence in each context, but rather points to the common embodied nature of the two languages’ speakers

EYE/KO‘Z as a Metonym for Seeing, Attention, and Supervision

A third fruitful example of metonymic conceptualization is vision. In English, the expression “keep an eye on someone/something” means to watch, supervise, or pay attention to a person/thing. The bodily organ used in the process of perception is a metaphorical representation of the process itself:

EYE FOR SEEING → SEEING FOR ATTENTION/SUPERVISION

In phraseological units in Uzbek, the word “ko‘z” “eye” is used extensively in relation to perception and attention. One of the more fascinating units in Uzbek is “ko‘z-quloq bo‘lmoq,” literally “to be eye and ear,” which means to supervise someone/thing closely. Two sensory organs are metaphorically combined and then perform the

functions they usually do, which in turn leads to the conceptualization of supervision. The examples demonstrate that the basis of embodiment is similar; however, Uzbek uses cultural conventions of combining two sensory organs in order to accomplish the purpose.

Scenario Metonymy and the Activation of Complex Events

All metonymic phraseology is not concerned with the body parts. Another key device relates to using one distinct phase of an event to evoke the entire familiar scenario. Metonymy studies indicate that the scenarios might have their own metonymic organization, whereby one element of the structured event activates the whole scenario. The phrase “dasturxon tuzamoq” “to spread the tablecloth/table spread” in Uzbek can serve as an example. Under certain circumstances, the particular action can evoke a broader scenario of hospitality, comprising preparation of food, reception of guests, serving a meal, sitting down at table, and socializing:

SUBEVENT FOR WHOLE EVENT/SCENARIO

It must be stated that “dasturxon tuzamoq” is much less idiomatically opaque than “boshini yo‘qotmoq”. Therefore, it is much more accurate to consider it a conventionalized phrase and to refer to it as an illustration of scenario metonymy than to assume that all scholars would consider it a full-fledged idiomatic phraseological unit. Nonetheless, its cognitive organization provides an interesting case of using culturally salient actions to access socially significant events in cognition.

In recent studies devoted to scenario metonymy in Uzbek, one can also find the analysis of how separate components of culturally familiar situations can activate whole event structures (Muzaffarova, 2025).

Interaction between Metonymy and Metaphor in Phraseological Meaning

As illustrated in the analysis presented above, there cannot always be an explicit boundary between metaphor and metonymy in phraseological semantics. The term “metaphonymy” has been invented by Goossens to describe the interplay of the two semantic operations. Metaphor can be a product of the metonymic process or metonymy can take place in the metaphorical context (Goossens, 1990). In addition, Barcelona describes metonymy as a cognitive operation that interacts with metaphor to form conceptualization in discourse (Barcelona, 2000). Such interplay becomes particularly evident in somatic phraseology.

In English “open one’s heart”:

- Metonymic root: *heart* for emotions/inner life;
- Metaphorical extension: emotional inner life is a container.
- Phraseological meaning: to disclose one’s intimate emotions honestly.

In Uzbek “ko‘nglini ochmoq”:

- Metonymic root: *ko'ngil* for emotional inner world;
- Metaphorical extension: inner world is a container.
- Phraseological meaning: to share one's feelings or talk openly about one's inner life. English "lose one's head" and Uzbek "boshini yo'qotmoq" include such "metonymic roots" as head/bosh for mental control.

These results indicate that the dichotomy between the concepts of "universal" and "culture-specific" phraseology cannot be interpreted as a mutually exclusive one. A phraseological unit can have a relatively universal semantic base and, at the same time, a culture-specific verbal expression. The common nature of bodily experiences imposes some restrictions on conceptual associations, while cultural norms determine which associations are lexicalized.

Conclusion

Conceptual metonymy performs an essential function in the process of semantic development of phraseological units in English and Uzbek languages. It is proven that many phraseological units are motivated through common embodied experience, mainly referring to human body parts such as *head/bosh*, *hand/qo'l*, *heart/ko'ngil*. However, the same concepts can be presented in different forms due to linguistic and cultural specificity of each language.

The results also show that the interaction between metaphor and metonymy is quite typical in the process of semantic development of a figurative meaning of phraseological units. In this case, metonymy gives conceptual background, while metaphor builds a figurative structure. Consequently, the phenomenon of conceptual metonymy can be regarded as a cognitive model that correlates the image of a phraseological unit with its conventional figurative meaning.

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