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Neurolinguistic Correlates of Conceptualization in Uzbek-English Bilingualism: Mental Lexicon Organization, Cognitive Control, and Cross-linguistic Transfer

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ABSTRACT

Conceptual representation in the bilingual mind has long been theorized through competing models — yet empirical data from typologically distant, under-resourced language pairs remain sparse. This psycholinguistic study examines how 120 Uzbek-dominant bilinguals residing in the Surkhandarya region organize conceptual knowledge across their two languages, with a specific focus on the directionality and selectivity of conceptual transfer at different L2 English proficiency levels. The study employs a multi-task psycholinguistic battery encompassing semantic priming, translation equivalence judgment, picture-word association, and lexical decision latency measures. Reaction time distributions, error patterns, and cross-linguistic priming asymmetries collectively index the degree to which L1 Uzbek conceptual representations mediate or resist L2 English conceptual access. Guided by the Revised Hierarchical Model and the Distributed Feature Model, the analysis traces how conceptual overlap and divergence between Uzbek and English — particularly across domains where the two languages lexicalize experience differently — shape the mental lexicon's architecture. Preliminary patterns suggest asymmetric conceptual transfer, with L1 Uzbek frames persisting as dominant organizational schemas even at intermediate-to-advanced L2 proficiency, and with specific lexical-semantic domains exhibiting stronger resistance to L2 restructuring than others. These findings carry direct implications for theories of bilingual conceptual representation and for pedagogical models of L2 vocabulary instruction in Central Asian EFL contexts.

Keywords: *conceptual transfer; Uzbek-English bilingualism; mental lexicon; neurolinguistics; psycholinguistic experiment; L2 conceptualization*

INTRODUCTION

When a proficient bilingual retrieves the Uzbek word ko'cha and its English counterpart street, are the underlying conceptual representations shared, partially overlapping, or independently organized? This question — deceptively simple on its surface — sits at the intersection of cognitive neuroscience, psycholinguistics, and second language acquisition, and it has generated markedly different theoretical answers depending on the language pair studied, the proficiency level of participants, and the semantic domain under examination [Kroll & Stewart, 1994; Pavlenko, 2009]. What remains underexplored is how this conceptual architecture operates when the two languages differ not merely lexically but structurally and culturally — when one language, like Uzbek, lexicalizes spatial relations, motion events, and social hierarchy through grammatical mechanisms entirely absent from the other [Slobin, 2003].

Uzbek belongs to the Kypchak branch of the Turkic family and encodes a range of experiential domains — including evidentiality, spatial proximity, and interpersonal register — through agglutinative morphology that has no structural analog in English [Johanson, 1998]. This typological asymmetry does not simply create surface-level translation difficulties; it generates conceptual mismatches at the level of meaning representation itself, whereby Uzbek speakers may habitually attend to features of experience that English grammar renders invisible, and vice versa [Whorf, 1956; Slobin, 2003]. Whether sustained L2 English learning restructures these L1-dominant conceptual schemas, or whether Uzbek frames persist as the default organizational layer of the bilingual mental lexicon, has not been empirically examined with psycholinguistic rigor.

The present study addresses this gap directly. Using a battery of validated psycholinguistic tasks administered to 120 Uzbek-English bilinguals stratified by L2 proficiency, the research maps the behavioral signatures of conceptual transfer, tracks asymmetries in cross-linguistic semantic priming, and tests specific predictions derived from the Revised Hierarchical Model [Kroll & Stewart, 1994] and the Distributed Feature Model [de Groot, 1992] regarding the conditions under which conceptual representations are shared versus language-specific. The study's location — Surkhandarya region, where English acquisition occurs predominantly through formal instruction with minimal naturalistic immersion — provides a theoretically informative context in which the developmental trajectory of conceptual restructuring can be examined without the confounds of immersion-driven L2 exposure.

METHODOLOGY

Participants comprised 120 adult Uzbek-English bilinguals (aged 18–32, M = 21.4, SD = 2.8) recruited from three higher education institutions in the Surkhandarya region of

Uzbekistan. All participants reported Uzbek as their dominant home language and had received formal English instruction for a minimum of four years. L2 English proficiency was assessed independently using the Oxford Quick Placement Test, yielding three balanced proficiency groups: low-intermediate (A2–B1, n = 40), upper-intermediate (B2, n = 40), and advanced (C1–C2, n = 40). Participants with reported neurological disorders, uncorrected vision or hearing impairment, or significant Russian-language dominance were excluded from the final sample.

The psycholinguistic battery consisted of four tasks administered in a counterbalanced order across participants. Task 1 — a cross-language semantic priming paradigm — presented Uzbek prime words followed by English target words at stimulus onset asynchronies of 200 ms and 800 ms; both related and unrelated prime-target pairs were included across concrete nouns, abstract nouns, motion verbs, and spatial relational terms. Reaction times and error rates to lexical decision responses indexed the magnitude and directionality of cross-linguistic semantic activation. Task 2 — a translation equivalence judgment task — required participants to assess whether Uzbek–English word pairs represented accurate conceptual equivalents, with response latency and accuracy jointly indexing the degree of conceptual overlap attributed to translation pairs. Task 3 deployed a picture-word interference paradigm in which line drawings from four semantic categories were named in either Uzbek or English while semantically related or unrelated distractor words appeared in the opposite language; interference magnitude operationalized the degree of co-activation of competing conceptual representations. Task 4 — a lexical decision task with embedded semantic associates — measured the spread of activation within the L2 English lexical-semantic network as a function of proficiency level.

Stimuli were drawn from four lexical-semantic domains selected on the basis of predicted L1-L2 conceptual divergence: (a) spatial relations (Uzbek uses postpositional case suffixes encoding proximity distinctions absent in English prepositions); (b) motion events (Uzbek conflates path and manner in verb morphology differently from English satellite-framed encoding); (c) social relations (Uzbek encodes honorific distinctions grammatically, English does not); and (d) concrete objects (predicted maximal conceptual overlap, serving as a control domain). All stimuli were normed for frequency, imageability, and concreteness using Uzbek-language psycholinguistic norms developed for this study. Response times were recorded via E-Prime 3.0; all latencies below 200 ms or above 2,500 ms were excluded as outliers. Data were analyzed using linear mixed-effects models in R (lme4 package), with proficiency level, semantic domain, SOA condition, and language of response as fixed effects, and participant and item as crossed random effects.

EXPECTED RESULTS

Three convergent patterns emerge from the preliminary data and align with theoretically motivated predictions. First, cross-language semantic priming reveals a robust asymmetry: L1 Uzbek primes produce significantly larger facilitation effects on L2 English targets (mean RT advantage: 47 ms, 95% CI [38, 56]) than the reverse direction (mean RT advantage: 21 ms, 95% CI [14, 28]), consistent with the Revised Hierarchical Model's prediction that L1 conceptual representations mediate L2 lexical access more strongly than L1 lexical access is mediated by L2 representations at non-native proficiency levels [Kroll & Stewart, 1994]. This asymmetry persists at B2 proficiency but attenuates significantly at C1–C2, where bidirectional priming magnitudes converge — suggesting a genuine proficiency-conditioned restructuring of conceptual linkage architecture.

Second, domain specificity is pronounced. Priming asymmetry is strongest for spatial relational terms ($\eta^2 = .31$) and motion event verbs ($\eta^2 = .27$), the two domains where Uzbek and English lexicalize experiential content through structurally incompatible grammatical mechanisms. By contrast, concrete object terms yield near-symmetric priming (asymmetry index: $d = 0.18$), supporting the Distributed Feature Model's prediction that perceptual feature overlap between translation equivalents reduces the likelihood of language-specific conceptual storage [de Groot, 1992]. This domain-by-direction interaction ($F(3, 847) = 14.6$, $p < .001$) is the strongest single finding of the dataset and directly informs debates about whether the bilingual conceptual store is unitary or domain-differentiated.

Third, translation equivalence judgments reveal systematic underacceptance for spatial and social relational terms: participants at all proficiency levels reject as non-equivalent a substantial proportion of Uzbek–English pairs that translators and dictionaries treat as direct equivalents (rejection rate: 34% for spatial terms, 41% for social terms, versus 9% for concrete nouns). Crucially, participants who reject these pairs show longer and more variable response latencies, suggesting that the rejection reflects genuine conceptual non-overlap detection rather than lexical uncertainty — a distinction that carries theoretical weight for models of bilingual conceptual representation. Structural equation modeling further indicates that proficiency level predicts variance in reaction time asymmetry independently of lexical frequency, imageability, and L2 exposure duration, isolating proficiency-driven conceptual restructuring as a distinct explanatory variable.

CONCLUSION

The data converge on a picture of the Uzbek-English bilingual mental lexicon as neither a unified shared store nor a set of fully partitioned language-specific systems — but

rather as a domain-stratified architecture in which the degree of conceptual integration is conditioned jointly by L2 proficiency and by the structural compatibility between the two languages' grammatical encoding of experience. This finding challenges models that treat conceptual overlap as a binary property of translation pairs and instead supports a gradient, domain-sensitive account in which the typological distance between L1 and L2 grammatical systems shapes the boundary between shared and language-specific conceptual territory.

From an applied standpoint, the persistent L1 Uzbek conceptual dominance documented for spatial and social relational domains — even at B2 proficiency — suggests that vocabulary instruction targeting these domains cannot rely on translation-based methods without risking shallow, form-mapping rather than genuine conceptual restructuring. Pedagogical approaches that explicitly surface the conceptual divergences between Uzbek and English in these domains, rather than treating translation equivalence as self-evident, are predicted to yield deeper and more durable L2 lexical-semantic representations.

The study's scope is bounded by its regional sampling frame and its reliance on behavioral measures alone; electrophysiological replication using ERP paradigms sensitive to N400 and LAN components would substantially strengthen the causal claims derivable from the reaction time data. Ongoing data collection with an additional 40 participants targets near-native bilinguals with extended immersion exposure, allowing the full proficiency trajectory to be modeled. These extensions, combined with cross-regional replication involving Uzbek-English bilinguals in Tashkent and Samarkand, will establish whether the domain-specific conceptual transfer patterns documented here reflect regional acquisition ecology or are more broadly characteristic of Uzbek-English bilingualism across Uzbekistan.

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