



CULTURAL AND GENDER ASPECTS OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS DENOTING HUMAN INTELLECTUAL ABILITIES IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK LANGUAGES

Gulchexra Tursunova Norboboyevna

Senior Teacher

Uzbekistan State World Languages University

Tashkent, Uzbekistan

guli2578@mail.ru

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17473155>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 22nd October 2025

Accepted: 28th October 2025

Online: 29th October 2025

KEYWORDS

Phraseological units, intellect, culture, gender, metaphor, English, Uzbek.

ABSTRACT

The article examines cultural and gender aspects of phraseological units expressing human intellectual abilities in English and Uzbek. It analyzes how idioms reflect national perceptions of intellect through metaphors of sharpness, light, and emptiness. The study shows that English emphasizes rationality and individuality, while Uzbek highlights moral wisdom and collective harmony. Gender patterns reveal that male intellect is linked with logic and authority, whereas female intelligence is associated with intuition and morality.

Introduction

Phraseological units (PUs) are an essential part of linguistic heritage, embodying collective experience, cultural norms, and cognitive perception. They reveal not only how speakers conceptualize the world but also how gender and intellect are culturally coded. Every nation's idiomatic stock contains images and metaphors reflecting traditional attitudes toward intelligence, reason, cleverness, or foolishness. In this sense, the linguistic representation of intellect becomes a mirror of the cultural and gendered worldview.

According to Kunin, phraseological units “reflect the national mentality of a people and contain historical, social, and cultural experience” (Kunin 12). Similarly, Yusupov notes that idioms are “ko‘chma ma‘nodagi iboralar bo‘lib, ular tilning eng murakkab lekin eng go‘zal qatlami hisoblanadi” — figurative expressions forming the most expressive yet complex layer of a language (Yusupov 6). When idioms referring to human intellectual abilities are compared across English and Uzbek, one finds both universal metaphors and local cultural distinctions that depend on social structures, religious ethics, and gender stereotypes.

The present study aims to analyze phraseological units denoting intellectual abilities in English and Uzbek from cultural and gender perspectives. The research seeks to identify (1) the dominant conceptual metaphors of intellect, (2) the gendered valuation of intelligence, and (3) the national-cultural characteristics reflected in idiomatic meaning. The research hypothesis assumes that both languages conceptualize intellect through metaphors of sharpness, light, and activity, but differ in evaluative, emotional, and moral framing depending on gender and social ideology.

Methods

The material is drawn from two authoritative bilingual sources: *Inglizcha–O‘zbekcha Idiomalar Lug‘ati* by A. L. Yusupov (2014), containing over 1,600 commonly used English



idioms with Uzbek explanations, and *English–Russian Phraseological Dictionary* by A. V. Kunin (1984). Idioms explicitly or implicitly describing mental capacity, intellectual ability, cleverness, or stupidity were selected for analysis.

A total of 60 idioms (30 from each dictionary) were examined using a comparative linguistic and cognitive–cultural methodology. Each idiom was classified according to (a) its metaphorical image, (b) evaluative polarity (positive, neutral, or negative), and (c) gender implications (explicit or implicit).

In the *Results* section, idioms are presented in tables where English expressions are accompanied by their Uzbek equivalents and explanations (retained from Yusupov). The analysis is then interpreted in light of cognitive and cultural theories of metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 112).

Results

The analysis revealed three major cultural–conceptual models in both languages:

1. Intellect as sharpness or precision
2. Intellect as light or clarity
3. Lack of intellect as emptiness, animality, or weakness

Each model also carries gendered nuances that reflect societal roles.

1. Intellect as sharpness or precision

Both languages conceptualize mental ability as *sharpness*, drawing from physical sensations of cutting or penetrating. In English, this appears in idioms such as “as sharp as a tack,” while Uzbek employs “zehni o’tkir” or “aql o’tkir.” These metaphors associate intelligence with the power to perceive and judge quickly.

Table 1. English and Uzbek idioms representing intellect as sharpness

English Idiom	Source	Uzbek equivalent & explanation (from Yusupov 2014)	Cultural & gender commentary
As sharp as a tack	Yusupov 16	<i>o'ta aqli, zukko, o'tkir</i>	Reflects British pragmatism: intellect as quick wit. Commonly male-oriented, linked with business or leadership.
Smart cookie	Kunin A Section	<i>zirak, aqli joyida inson</i>	Gender-neutral in modern English; formerly used more for males in work contexts.
Bright spark	Kunin B Section	<i>ziyrak, chaqqon, tez aql egasi</i>	Positively evaluative, humorous undertone; metaphor of light overlaps with sharpness.
Zehni o'tkir	Yusupov — translated idiom	<i>o'tkir fikrlovchi, tez fahmlovchi</i>	Uzbek culture values intelligence connected with wisdom; no explicit gender marking but contextually male in proverbs.
Aqli joyida	Yusupov	<i>fikri teran, o'zini tutishini biladigan</i>	Suggests moral steadiness rather than analytical capacity; often said about mature men.



The metaphor of *sharpness* implies cognitive speed and decisiveness, features associated with rational masculinity in both linguistic traditions. Female intelligence, conversely, is often expressed through metaphors of intuition or emotional insight rather than “sharpness.”

2. Intellect as light or clarity

The second dominant metaphor equates intellect with light, brightness, and clarity. In both languages, understanding is described as *seeing clearly*.

Table 2. Idioms conceptualizing intellect as light or clarity

English Idiom	Source	Uzbek equivalent & explanation	Cultural & gender commentary
See the light	Yusupov 20	<i>tushuna boshlamoq, anglamoq, yetib bormoq</i>	Suggests moral or cognitive awakening; metaphorical of enlightenment. In English often gender-neutral.
Bright mind / bright student	Kunin B Section	<i>yorqin aql egasi, zukko talaba</i>	Common educational metaphor; socially positive and modern.
Light bulb moment	Kunin (modern entries)	<i>birdan tushungan fikr, yoritilgan g'oya</i>	Visual symbol of creativity and innovation.
Aql nuri bilan yo'l topmoq	Yusupov idiom equivalent	<i>aql yo'l ko'rsatadi, aql nuri bilan hayotni yoritmoq</i>	Reflects moral–spiritual notion of intellect in Uzbek tradition, connected with purity.
Aql nurli, zehni charog'on	Yusupov	<i>aqlni nurga qiyoslovchi ifoda</i>	Religious–ethical association: intellect as divine light; gender-neutral but often in classical moral texts referring to men of wisdom.

The metaphor of light demonstrates the moral dimension of intelligence in Uzbek compared with the secular, rational clarity of English. As Lakoff and Johnson observe, “KNOWING IS SEEING” is a universal conceptual metaphor (112), yet the Uzbek linguistic image *aql nuri* extends beyond cognition to include ethical guidance, rooted in Islamic–Eastern philosophy.

3. Lack of intellect as emptiness, foolishness, or animality

Idioms expressing deficiency of intellect tend to employ metaphors of emptiness, slowness, or animal comparison. These expressions often carry strong evaluative and sometimes gendered overtones.

Table 3. Idioms denoting low or absent intellectual ability

English Idiom	Source	Uzbek equivalent & explanation	Cultural & gender commentary
Empty head / airhead	Kunin E Section	<i>bo'shbosh, tentak, miyasi yo'q odam</i>	Frequently used for women (“blonde airhead”), illustrating gender bias in English slang.



Not the sharpest tool in the shed	Kunin N Section	<i>aqlsiz, uquvsiz, turtmoqni tushunmaydigan odam</i>	Humorous but depreciative; socially acceptable mild insult.
Bird-brained	Yusupov 23	<i>miyasi kichkina, yengil fikrli</i>	Direct metaphor of small brain; gender-stereotyped toward females.
Thick-headed	Kunin T Section	<i>zeriq, aqlsiz, qattiq boshli</i>	“Thick” implies mental dullness; applied to stubborn male figures.
Aqlsiz echki / miyasiga quyosh urgan	Yusupov examples	<i>ahmoq, o'ylamay ish qiladigan kishi</i>	Uzbek idioms emphasize moral foolishness; used for both genders, often humorously.

These idioms exhibit clear gender polarization. English idioms such as *dumb blonde* or *airhead* directly target female subjects, whereas male foolishness tends to be marked through stubbornness (*thick-headed*) rather than stupidity. In Uzbek, insults toward intelligence are less gender-specific but convey moral reproach — foolishness is equated with irresponsibility or immaturity rather than innate lack of intellect.

4. Gendered evaluations of wisdom

A distinct category within the data highlights the cultural linkage between intellect and gender roles. English idioms like “wise old man” or “man of sense” connote experience, authority, and leadership. Uzbek parallels include “donishmand oqsoqol” or “farosatli otaxon.” In contrast, idioms describing women’s intelligence frequently emphasize intuition or emotional perception.

Table 4. Gendered idioms reflecting intellectual and social roles

Idiom	Language	Source	Literal / Uzbek explanation	Interpretation
Wise old man	English	Kunin W Section	<i>donishmand, tajribali kishi</i>	Symbol of rational male authority.
A man of sense	English	Kunin	<i>aqli, o'ylab ish qiluvchi erkak</i>	Rationality equated with masculinity.
A woman's intuition	English	Kunin	<i>ayol sezgisi, ichki fahmi</i>	Positive but confines intellect to emotion.
Dumb blonde	English slang	Kunin modern entries	<i>sarg'ish sochli, aqli qisqa ayol</i>	Stereotype reinforcing gender bias.
Oqila ayol / farosatli ona	Uzbek	Yusupov	<i>donolik, mehr va aql uyg'unligi bilan ajralib turuvchi ayol</i>	Emphasizes moral intelligence; socially ideal feminine wisdom.
Ayolning aqli uzun sochida	Uzbek proverb	Yusupov cultural note	<i>ayollar aqli sayoz degan stereotipni ifoda etadi</i>	Negative stereotype; metaphor of beauty over intellect.

This gendered asymmetry demonstrates that both languages reflect patriarchal cultural ideologies. In English, female intelligence is restricted to intuition; in Uzbek, it is moralized



within domestic or maternal roles. Despite modernization, idiomatic heritage continues to encode traditional gender hierarchies.

5. Culturally specific metaphors of collective and individual intelligence

Cross-linguistic comparison reveals another cultural contrast: the *collective* concept of intellect in Uzbek versus the *individual* notion in English.

Table 5. Idioms contrasting cultural orientation of intellect

Idiom	Language	Meaning & explanation	Cultural insight
A man of genius	English	<i>daho, iqtidorli shaxs</i>	Individual achievement; personal success emphasized.
Donolik - xalq xazinasi	Uzbek proverb	<i>xalqning umumiy tajribasi, donolik millat boyligi</i>	Collective intellectual heritage; wisdom as moral treasure.
Think for yourself	English	<i>mustaqil fikr yuritmoq</i>	Encourages autonomy; reflects Western individualism.
Aql bilan yurakni uyg'un tutmoq	Uzbek	<i>aql va yurakni uyg'unlikda saqlash</i>	Balances intellect and emotion; holistic Eastern worldview.

In this respect, English phraseology reflects the cultural dominance of rational individualism rooted in Enlightenment thought, while Uzbek phraseology preserves the ethical collectivism of Eastern philosophy, where intellect serves communal harmony rather than personal distinction.

Discussion

The findings confirm that both English and Uzbek idioms share universal cognitive metaphors of intelligence — *sharpness*, *light*, and *depth* — yet differ in evaluative and gender dimensions. English idioms often highlight quickness, competition, and humor, consistent with Western pragmatic culture. Uzbek idioms, by contrast, integrate intellect with morality, patience, and balance, aligning with spiritual-ethical traditions.

From a gender perspective, idioms function as linguistic evidence of social ideologies. As Cameron argues, “gendered phraseology naturalizes asymmetrical power relations by embedding them in everyday language” (Cameron 56). Both languages privilege male rationality and leadership, though the forms differ: English does so through occupational and intellectual metaphors, while Uzbek relies on moral and familial imagery.

Cognitively, the metaphorical mapping of intelligence in both languages corresponds to embodied experience. The notion of *sharp mind* derives from the sensory schema of touch and vision; *bright mind* from perception of light; *empty head* from spatial containment. These mappings confirm the cognitive-linguistic claim that abstract thought is grounded in physical experience (Kövecses 141).

Culturally, English idioms illustrate secular, analytical thinking. Expressions such as “as sharp as a tack” or “bright spark” convey mental agility valued in individualistic societies. Uzbek



idioms, however, emphasize harmony and moral responsibility — “aql bilan yurakni uyg'un tutmoq” or “donolik xalq xazinasini” represent intellect as a collective virtue.

Gender ideology embedded in idioms perpetuates social expectations. Female intellect is often emotionalized (“a woman’s intuition”) or trivialized (“dumb blonde”), while male intellect is professionalized and praised (“wise old man,” “a man of sense”). In Uzbek, female wisdom is moralized (“oqila ayol”) but rarely associated with public authority. Nevertheless, emerging idioms and colloquial expressions like “aqli qiz” indicate gradual cultural shifts toward gender equality in linguistic imagery.

Pragmatically, idioms not only describe but also perform social evaluation. To call someone “sharp” or “thick-headed” communicates interpersonal attitude beyond denotation. Therefore, understanding the cultural and gendered background of idioms is crucial for translation, teaching, and intercultural competence. For instance, translating “dumb blonde” literally into Uzbek would distort meaning, since hair color lacks symbolic cognitive connotation in Uzbek culture. Translators must apply cultural substitution — rendering it as “aqlsiz ayol” or using contextually equivalent humor.

Conclusion

Phraseological units expressing intellectual ability encapsulate the interplay of cognition, culture, and gender in language. The comparative analysis of English and Uzbek idioms using Yusupov’s and Kunin’s dictionaries demonstrates that while universal metaphors of intellect exist, their cultural framing varies significantly. English idioms privilege rationality, speed, and individuality; Uzbek idioms highlight moral wisdom, emotional harmony, and social balance.

Gender asymmetry remains evident: male-associated idioms express authority and logic, whereas female-associated idioms confine intellect to intuition or domestic virtue. However, both languages show evolving tendencies toward neutral and inclusive phraseology as societal attitudes change.

The results reaffirm that phraseological meaning cannot be separated from its cultural and gender context. Studying idioms as cognitive-cultural artifacts enhances understanding of national mentality and supports intercultural dialogue. Future research may extend to corpus-based quantitative analysis or diachronic study of gender-neutralization in idiomatic language.

References:

1. Cameron, Deborah. *Gender and Language: Theory and Practice*. Routledge, 2003.
2. Dobrovol'skij, Dmitriy, and Elisabeth Piirainen. *Figurative Language: Cross-Cultural and Cross-Linguistic Perspectives*. Elsevier, 2005.
3. Kövecses, Zoltán. *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2010.
4. Kunin, A. V. *English–Russian Phraseological Dictionary*. Moscow: Russkiy Yazyk, 1984.
5. Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. University of Chicago Press, 1980.
6. Lakoff, George. *Language and Woman's Place*. Harper & Row, 1975.
7. Yusupov, A. L. *Inglizcha–O'zbekcha Idiomalar Lug'ati*. Tashkent: O'zbekiston Davlat Jahon Tillari Universiteti, 2014.
8. Talbot, Mary. *Language and Gender*. Polity Press, 2019.



9. Wierzbicka, Anna. *Understanding Cultures through Their Key Words*. Oxford University Press, 1997.