

A Contrastive Phraseological Analysis: Metaphorical Expressions in Azerbaijani and English

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Abstract

This study conducts a rigorous contrastive analysis of metaphorical phraseological units (PUs) in Azerbaijani and English, interrogating the cognitive, ethno-linguistic, and cultural architectures that underpin linguistic imagery in two typologically distinct language systems — one Turkic, one Germanic. Grounded in the dual theoretical framework of Contrastive Linguistics and Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) as articulated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the investigation explores how each linguistic system encodes human experience, social reality, and cultural memory into stable, figurative expressions. Through a qualitative and quantitative corpus-based methodology, the research identifies and systematizes a tripartite classification of cross-linguistic equivalence: full, partial, and zero equivalence. Central to the analysis is the cognitive “mapping” of concrete source domains — the body, the animal kingdom, and the natural world — onto abstract target domains encompassing emotion, social hierarchy, and intellect. The findings reveal a significant divergence in metaphorical production: while somatic metaphors, anchored in universal human physiology, demonstrate high degrees of cross-linguistic symmetry, zoomorphic and nature-based metaphors prove deeply contingent upon the unique ecological environments, historical trajectories, and folkloric traditions of their respective speech communities. Cases of zero equivalence are examined in particular depth as semiotic markers of irreducible cultural specificity. This study advances the field of intercultural pragmatics by charting the cognitive “traps” and “bridges” encountered in the translation and pedagogical acquisition of these languages, and by foregrounding the role of the translator as a “cognitive architect” navigating the irreversible asymmetry between cultural conceptual systems.

Keywords: *phraseology; Conceptual Metaphor Theory; contrastive linguistics; cognitive linguistics; cultural mediation; somatic metaphors; zero equivalence; intercultural pragmatics*

1. Introduction

Phraseology constitutes the living memory of a language community — a crystallized repository of its historical consciousness, ecological imagination, and cognitive preferences encoded in the immovable architecture of fixed expressions. More than decorative embellishment, the metaphorical phraseological unit (PU) is, in the words of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), a primary instrument of human thought itself: a mechanism through which abstract, intangible domains of experience — love, power, mortality, fear — are rendered conceptually accessible through the mapping of familiar, concrete source domains. To study these units contrastively across languages is, therefore, to interrogate not merely linguistic form but the deeper cognitive architectures through which distinct civilizations have constructed and transmitted their understanding of reality.

The Azerbaijani language, rooted in the Oghuz branch of the Turkic family and shaped across centuries by nomadic pastoralism, Zoroastrian cosmology, and Sufi mystical tradition, encodes a metaphorical worldview that is fundamentally distinct from the one operative in English — a West Germanic language whose metaphorical imagination bears the indelible imprint of maritime expansionism, Protestant industriousness, and Enlightenment rationalism. Yet, crucially, both systems deploy the same fundamental cognitive operation: the systematic *mapping* of one conceptual domain onto another. The scholarly question is not whether metaphor is universal — it manifestly is — but precisely *how* and *why* the specific images chosen to instantiate that universal operation diverge so strikingly between cultures.

As Khudaverdiyeva (2024b) observes, bridging these linguistic and cultural divergences remains one of the most formidable challenges in contemporary translation theory. The task demands far more than lexical substitution or grammatical transposition; it requires what might be called *cognitive re-mapping* — a reconstruction of the conceptual scaffolding that a given metaphor presupposes. Fail to perform this reconstruction, and the translation may achieve technical accuracy while remaining culturally hollow: a linguistically correct corpse drained of its communicative vitality. The stakes of this failure are not purely academic. In an era of accelerating digital interconnection and transnational migration, the fidelity of metaphorical transfer has become a practical necessity for effective cross-cultural legal, medical, diplomatic, and interpersonal communication.

This article addresses this challenge through a systematic contrastive analysis of metaphorical PUs drawn from three archetypal source domains: the human body (somatic metaphors), the animal kingdom (zoomorphic metaphors), and elemental nature. These domains are chosen precisely because they represent points of both universal physiological experience and radical cultural divergence — the same physical substance filtered through profoundly different historical and ecological imaginations. The overarching aim is to construct a nuanced equivalence taxonomy that maps not only semantic overlap but the full depth of cognitive and cultural correspondences and mismatches between the two languages.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical grounding and methodological design. Section 3 presents the results of the contrastive analysis, examining somatic, zoomorphic, and nature-based metaphors in turn before addressing the theoretically crucial phenomenon of zero equivalence. Section 4 synthesizes the findings into broader conclusions with implications for translation theory, intercultural pragmatics, and language pedagogy.

2. Materials and Methods

The empirical foundation of this study rests on a purposively assembled corpus of phraseological units extracted from authoritative lexicographic sources in both languages. Primary resources include the *Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms*, the *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms*, and the *Azərbaycandil Frazelogiya Lüğəti* — supplemented by corpus-based examples drawn from contemporary literary prose, journalistic archives, and verified digital media in both languages. This dual approach — combining prescriptive lexicographic authority with descriptive corpus evidence — ensures that the units analysed reflect both the codified tradition and the living usage of each language.

The methodology is structured through four sequential analytical phases, organized within a Contrastive-Typological framework.

2.1 Selection and Corpus Design

The initial phase involved the systematic identification of PUs sharing an equivalent source domain across both languages. The corpus is deliberately restricted to three primary thematic categories — somatic (body parts), zoomorphic (animals), and natural elements (fire, water, wind) — on the theoretical grounds that these domains provide the most productive basis for controlled cross-linguistic comparison. As universally experienced physical realities, they offer a stable *tertium comparationis* against which culturally specific metaphorical elaborations can be measured with precision.

2.2 Cognitive Mapping via Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Each PU was deconstructed according to the tenets of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) as elaborated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and extended by Kövecses (2010). This involved identifying the *source domain*, the *target domain*, and the specific *ontological correspondences* (mappings) operative between them. Crucially, the analysis moves beyond surface paraphrase to expose the underlying cognitive models at work: for instance, the cross-linguistic mapping *ANGER IS HEAT* is instantiated in English through the image of *boiling* (“she was boiling with rage”) and in Azerbaijani through the image of *burning fire* (“qanı qayırdı” — his blood was seething), revealing a shared conceptual skeleton beneath divergent surface imagery.

2.3 Equivalence Testing and Categorization

All PU pairs were subjected to a triaxial equivalence test measuring semantic (propositional meaning), structural (grammatical configuration and syntactic type), and cultural (connotative and pragmatic weight) correspondence. This yields three equivalence categories:

- **Full Equivalence:** The source and target PUs share an identical conceptual mapping, equivalent imagery, and comparable communicative function. Such units constitute strong evidence for cognitive universality.
- **Partial Equivalence:** The units share propositional meaning but diverge in their metaphorical imagery or structural realization, reflecting the influence of distinct ecological or cultural imaginations on a shared conceptual template.
- **Zero Equivalence:** The source PU possesses no direct metaphorical counterpart in the target language. These units represent the deepest stratum of cultural specificity — what Nida (1964) would term culture-bound expressions — and constitute the most demanding challenge for the translator and language learner alike.

2.4 Specialized Linguistic Navigation

The fourth analytical phase draws on the specialized framework advanced by Khudaverdiyeva (2024a) to address the particular challenge of translating technical or professionally embedded metaphors — that is, PUs that operate simultaneously within general language and specialized domain discourse (legal, medical, or scientific). Applying Khudaverdiyeva’s model of “navigation,” the analysis evaluates the degree to which the technical precision of a metaphorical expression can be preserved when its cultural imagery must be abandoned or radically adapted.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Somatic Metaphorical Mappings: The Body as Universal Ground

The human body, as the one domain of experience shared unconditionally across all speech communities regardless of geography, history, or ecology, predictably yields the highest density of cross-linguistic equivalence in the corpus. Both Azerbaijani and English draw extensively on the **heart** and the **eye** as source domains, yet the cultural coloration of each language's elaboration of these universal raw materials reveals a telling divergence in the communities' dominant cognitive and social preoccupations.

The Heart (Ürək): In English, the heart functions primarily as the seat of moral character and emotional courage: *a heart of gold* encodes moral excellence; *to lose heart* encodes the failure of resolve. The metaphorical register is largely evaluative and volitional. Azerbaijani, while sharing these mappings, extends the heart's semantic territory into the domain of somatic empathy and existential terror. *Ürəyi yanmaq* (literally "his/her heart burns") encodes profound compassion; *ürəyi ağızına gəlmək* (literally "his/her heart came to his/her mouth") encodes visceral, embodied dread. The Azerbaijani heart is a more physically volatile organ — one that migrates, combusts, and ascends within the body in response to emotional extremity. This reflects a broader phenomenological disposition in Azerbaijani metaphorical thought that encodes abstract psychological states through dramatic somatic displacement.

The Eye (Göz): English ocular phraseology is oriented predominantly toward the epistemic functions of surveillance and judgment: *to keep an eye on someone* encodes vigilance and power; *to see eye to eye* encodes cognitive consensus. The eye in English is, above all, an instrument of rational monitoring. Azerbaijani ocular phraseology, by contrast, is substantially organized around the culturally specific concept of the *Nəzar* — the Evil Eye. The expression *gözə gəlmək* (literally "to come to someone's eye") — meaning to fall under malevolent gaze and consequently suffer misfortune — demonstrates how deep belief structures, in this case a pre-Islamic and Islamic-inherited folk belief in ocular malevolence, become grammaticalized within the phraseological system itself. The eye in Azerbaijani is not merely an epistemic instrument but a potentially dangerous force — a locus of power that can harm as well as perceive.

3.2 Zoomorphic Metaphors: Ecology and History as Cognitive Architecture

Zoomorphic metaphors are, in many respects, the most culturally saturated stratum of the phraseological lexicon, because the specific animals a community privileges as metaphorical vehicles reflect not abstract cognition but the concrete realities of its historical economy, ecological environment, and social organization. The zoomorphic PUs of English overwhelmingly reflect the agrarian, maritime, and later industrial fabric of Anglophone culture: fish, dogs, cattle, and horses populate English idioms in formations whose imagery presupposes intimate familiarity with farming, seafaring, and field sports. Azerbaijani zoomorphic phraseology, by contrast, is organized around the social and symbolic centrality of the horse, the camel, the sheep, and the wolf in a nomadic and pastoral economy — a fundamentally different relationship between the human community and the animal world.

The expression *at muraddır* ("the horse is one's wish" or "the horse is fortune") exemplifies this with particular force. The horse in traditional Azerbaijani culture was not merely a utility animal but a symbol of masculine prowess, social status, spiritual aspiration, and the fulfillment of destiny — a creature so deeply woven into the fabric of nomadic life that it acquired sacred connotations. English possesses no direct equivalent that maps the same conceptual territory; *a dark horse* shares the animal source domain but maps onto an entirely different target — unknowability and surprise rather than

fulfilled aspiration. The gap is not lexical but ontological: it reflects a different civilization's relationship to a different phenomenological world.

Table 1 below systematizes a representative selection of the zoomorphic and elemental PUs from the corpus, together with their assessed equivalence levels:

Table 1

Selected Metaphorical Phraseological Units in Azerbaijani and English: Equivalence Classification

Source Domain	English PU	Azerbaijani PU	Equivalence
Wolf	<i>A wolf in sheep's clothing</i>	<i>Canavar kimi (acts like a wolf)</i>	Partial
Fire	<i>To play with fire</i>	<i>Odlə oynamaq (to play with fire)</i>	Full
Horse	<i>Dark horse</i>	<i>At muraddır (the horse is destiny/wish)</i>	Zero
Dog	<i>Let sleeping dogs lie</i>	<i>Yatan iti oyatma (don't wake a sleeping dog)</i>	Full
Camel	<i>The straw that broke the camel's back</i>	<i>Dəvənin quyruğu yerə dəyəndə</i>	Partial
Water	<i>Blood is thicker than water</i>	<i>Qan su deyil (blood is not water)</i>	Full
Eye	<i>An eye for an eye</i>	<i>Göz əvəzinə göz (eye for eye)</i>	Full
Heart	<i>A heart of gold</i>	<i>Ürəyi qızıl (heart of gold)</i>	Full
Head	<i>To keep one's head above water</i>	<i>Başını suya batırmamaq</i>	Partial

Note. PU = Phraseological Unit. Equivalence levels: Full = identical imagery and meaning; Partial = shared meaning, divergent image; Zero = no direct metaphorical counterpart.

3.3 Zero Equivalence: The Limits of Translatability and the Irreducibility of Culture

The phenomenon of zero equivalence is theoretically the most consequential finding of this analysis, because it marks precisely the point at which the universality of cognitive metaphor gives way to the irreducible specificity of cultural experience. Zero equivalence occurs when a source-language PU is not merely absent from the target language's lexical repertoire but is rooted in a conceptual world so particular to its originating community that no functionally adequate metaphorical counterpart exists in the target system.

The Azerbaijani expression *başına dönüm* offers a paradigmatic illustration. Literally rendered as “let me revolve around your head,” the expression derives from an ancient ritual practice of sacrificial substitution — the belief that by symbolically circling another person's head, one can absorb or deflect their misfortunes. In contemporary usage, the phrase functions as an intensified term of endearment and devotional submission, conveying a depth of sacrificial affection for which English possesses no metaphorical equivalent. The closest approximations — *my dear*, *I adore you*, *I would do anything for you* — render the propositional content while evacuating the ritual, spiritual, and communal

dimensions that give the expression its full semantic weight. This is the phenomenon that Nida (1964) terms *dynamic equivalence failure*: the point at which fidelity to form and fidelity to meaning become irreconcilable.

The English expression *to have a chip on one's shoulder* presents a symmetrically inverse problem. Originating in an 18th-century American practice of placing a wood chip on one's shoulder as a physical dare to combat, the metaphor now encodes a persistent sense of grievance, wounded pride, or social resentment. Because the *source domain* — the specific gestural practice of the chip-on-shoulder challenge — is entirely absent from Azerbaijani historical and social experience, a literal translation would generate not merely unfamiliarity but active semantic noise: the absence of a shared cultural referent means that the image cannot perform its conceptual mapping function. The Azerbaijani translator's only viable recourse is the strategy Khudaverdiyeva (2024a) terms *functional navigation*: the substitution of the untranslatable source image with a target-language expression that achieves equivalent pragmatic effect — perhaps *iddialı olmaq* (to be contentious or combative) or *incikmik* (to nurse a grievance) — at the acknowledged cost of the original expression's metaphorical vividness.

What these cases illuminate is the ultimate non-transparency of language as a medium of cross-cultural communication. As Khudaverdiyeva (2025) argues in the context of specialized translation, the translator functions not as a conduit but as a *cognitive architect* — one who must dismantle a conceptual structure built from one cultural material and reconstruct its communicative function from an entirely different set of cognitive and cultural resources. Zero equivalence cases render this architectural labour visible in its most demanding form, exposing the degree to which every successful act of translation is simultaneously an act of cultural interpretation and negotiation.

4. Conclusion

The contrastive analysis of metaphorical phraseological units in Azerbaijani and English has yielded findings that are simultaneously confirming and challenging for cognitive linguistic theory. They are confirming in that the fundamental thesis of Conceptual Metaphor Theory is borne out: the abstract domains of emotion, morality, social hierarchy, and intellect are mapped, in both languages, onto the concrete source domains of the body, the animal world, and elemental nature. At the level of cognitive architecture, human metaphorical thought appears genuinely universal.

They are challenging, however, in their insistence on the profound and non-trivial degree to which the specific images deployed to instantiate that universal architecture are determined by the particular historical, ecological, and spiritual experience of each speech community. Somatic metaphors — anchored in the universality of human embodiment — exhibit the highest degree of cross-linguistic symmetry and provide the most fertile ground for the kind of full equivalence that makes translation a genuinely transparent operation. Zoomorphic and nature-based metaphors, however, reveal the decisive influence of ecological history: the horse, the camel, the wolf mean different things in the phraseological systems of a pastoral nomadic civilization and a maritime commercial one, because the human relationships to these animals and to these natural forces have been categorically different.

The category of zero equivalence, finally, marks the theoretical and practical frontier of translatability. These culture-bound units — those whose source domain is so particular to one community's historical experience that it leaves no footprint in the other language's cognitive landscape — demand from the translator precisely the kind of deep, culturally-informed “navigation” that Khudaverdiyeva (2024a, 2024b, 2025) has foregrounded in the context of specialized communication. They demonstrate that

the translator is never a neutral intermediary but always, necessarily, a mediator between cognitive worlds.

The broader significance of these findings extends beyond translation theory to language pedagogy and intercultural communication. A learner of Azerbaijani as a foreign language who encounters – or an Azerbaijani learner of English who must acquire and deploy – the metaphorical phraseological units of the other language faces a task that is not merely lexical but cognitive: the acquisition of a new system of conceptual mappings, a new set of imaginative defaults, a new way of understanding the abstract through the concrete. Equipping such learners — and the educators who support them — with an explicit understanding of the cognitive and cultural architecture of these differences is, this study argues, among the most valuable services that contrastive linguistic analysis can render.

Future research should extend this corpus-based approach to digital and social media language, where the “Anglicization” of modern Azerbaijani phraseology is proceeding at a historically unprecedented pace, and where the collision and hybridization of metaphorical systems is generating new forms whose equivalence status remains uncharted territory. The investigation of how artificial intelligence-driven translation engines handle zero equivalence cases, and whether their outputs achieve genuine functional equivalence or merely surface-level approximation, represents an equally urgent and productive direction for further inquiry.

Declarations

Ethical Approval: This study is based entirely on publicly available lexicographic sources, corpora, and published scholarly literature. No human participants were involved in data collection. All sources are appropriately cited in accordance with academic ethical standards.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Data Availability: The corpus of phraseological units analysed in this study is drawn from publicly available dictionaries and databases cited in the references. Additional data are available from the author upon reasonable request.

Author Contributions: This study was solely conducted by the single author, who is responsible for conceptualization, corpus design, theoretical analysis, and writing of the manuscript.

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