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PAPER

A COGNITIVE-LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF WISH AND DESIRE CONCEPTS IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK LEXICAL SYSTEMS

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Abstract

The present study examines how the concepts of wish and desire are structured, categorized, and lexically expressed in English and Uzbek from a cognitive-linguistic perspective. We argue that the conceptualization of these volitional states is not universal but is shaped by the cultural and cognitive models embedded in each language. Drawing on prototype theory, conceptual metaphor theory, and the notion of radial categories, we analyze a set of lexical units — including wish, desire, hope, want, orzu, istak, umid, and armon — and trace the cognitive paths through which speakers of each language construct and communicate inner volitional experience. Our findings reveal that English organizes wish and desire around a relatively individualistic, achievement-oriented cognitive model. In contrast, Uzbek encodes these concepts through frameworks rooted in communal values, patience, and spiritual aspiration. These cross-linguistic differences carry meaningful implications for contrastive linguistics, cultural semantics, and the broader study of language and thought.

Key words: cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor, prototype theory, wish, desire, English, Uzbek, contrastive lexicology, volitional semantics.

Introduction

Language does not merely name the world — it reflects the way communities perceive, organize, and give meaning to their inner and outer reality. Among the most intimate dimensions of human experience are volitional states: the impulses, longings, and aspirations that drive human action and expression. When we examine how different languages encode these states, we gain access not only to linguistic structure but to the cognitive and cultural architectures that underlie them.

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The present article focuses on two such volitional concepts — wish and desire — and investigates how they are lexically realized and cognitively structured in English and Uzbek. We chose these two languages because they belong to typologically distinct families (Germanic and Turkic respectively), operate within contrasting cultural traditions, and have received comparatively little attention in the cognitive-linguistic literature when placed side by side. This gap motivates the current inquiry.

The study is situated within the framework of cognitive linguistics, which holds that language is not an autonomous system but is grounded in human cognitive processes such as categorization, metaphorical reasoning, and mental imagery. From this perspective, lexical units are not arbitrary labels but windows into conceptual structures — structures that vary meaningfully across languages and cultures.

We approach the research problem through three interconnected theoretical tools: prototype theory, as developed by Rosch (1975) and later applied to lexical semantics; conceptual metaphor theory, introduced by Lakoff and Johnson (1980); and the framework of radial categories, used to map the internal structure of semantic fields. Together, these frameworks allow us to move beyond surface-level translation equivalents and examine the deeper cognitive logic governing wish-desire vocabulary in each language.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant theoretical background. Section 3 describes our methodology and the corpus of lexical units under examination. Section 4 presents the findings, organized around the key cognitive patterns identified in each language. Section 5 discusses the implications of these findings for contrastive linguistics and language-cognition relations. Section 6 draws conclusions and identifies directions for further research.

Theoretical Background. Cognitive linguistics emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s as a response to the formalist tradition that treated language as a self-contained system, separate from mind and culture. Scholars such as Lakoff (1987), Langacker (1987), and Talmy (2000) argued instead that grammatical and lexical structures are motivated by — and must be explained in terms of — general cognitive mechanisms: categorization, image schemas, mental spaces, and conceptual metaphor.

Within this framework, the meaning of a word is not a fixed, definitional property but a cognitive construction — a conceptual structure activated in the mind of a speaker within a specific cultural and situational context. This view has profound consequences for contrastive lexicology: rather than asking whether words in two languages are translatable, we ask how the conceptual structures they activate differ, overlap, and interact.

Prototype theory, as formulated by Rosch (1975, 1978), challenges the classical assumption that category membership is defined by necessary and sufficient features. Instead, Rosch showed that natural categories are organized around prototypes — the most central, representative members — with less typical members arranged at the periphery.

Lakoff (1987) extended this insight to lexical semantics through the notion of radial categories, in which a central sense of a word radiates outward to related but distinct senses through motivated extensions. We apply this model directly to the wish-desire lexical field in both English and Uzbek, tracing the radial structures that connect the core meanings of key lexical units to their peripheral senses and culturally specific connotations.

Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) conceptual metaphor theory holds that abstract domains of experience — including emotions and volitional states — are cognitively structured through mappings from concrete source domains. These mappings are not merely poetic devices; they are the primary cognitive mechanism through which speakers understand and reason about abstractions.

In the domain of desire and longing, cross-linguistic research has identified widespread metaphors such as DESIRE IS HUNGER, DESIRE IS HEAT, and HOPE IS A LIGHT IN DARKNESS. We examine whether these metaphors operate in both English and Uzbek, and where the two languages diverge — a divergence that, we argue, reflects deeper cognitive and cultural differences in how volitional experience is conceptualized.

Wierzbicka's (1992, 1999) work on semantic universals and cultural scripts established that

volitional words such as want and wish are not universal primes but culturally loaded expressions that resist direct cross-linguistic equivalence. Her work on Slavic and English emotion vocabulary demonstrated that even closely related languages organize volitional experience differently. Within Uzbek linguistics, scholarship has addressed the semantic fields of orzu (deep longing), istak (desire), umid (hope), and armon (unfulfilled regret) primarily from a traditional lexicographic perspective. To our knowledge, no study has analyzed these units through the lens of cognitive linguistics in systematic comparison with English equivalents. The present article addresses that gap.

Methodology

We adopt a qualitative, corpus-informed approach grounded in contextual and textual analysis. Rather than relying on a single large corpus, we draw on a purposively selected set of authentic texts from both languages — literary prose, journalistic writing, proverbs, and conversational excerpts — with the goal of capturing the full range of cognitive uses and cultural connotations associated with each lexical unit.

This design is appropriate for our objectives because cognitive-linguistic analysis requires rich, contextualized data in which the conceptual and cultural dimensions of meaning are visible. Frequency data alone would obscure precisely the kind of qualitative distinctions we seek to illuminate.

For English, we selected the following units as the primary lexical field of wish and desire: wish, desire, hope, want, long for, yearn, and crave. For Uzbek, the corresponding field comprises: orzu, istak, umid, armon, intilmoq (to strive), and sog'inmoq (to miss/yearn). The selection was guided by dictionary definitions, native speaker consultation, and their recurrence in authentic texts.

We deliberately included units at varying levels of intensity and cultural specificity. This allowed us to examine not only how the two languages carve up the general semantic space of volitional experience, but also where culturally unique concepts — ones with no direct equivalent in the other language — emerge. Each lexical unit was analyzed in three stages. First, we identified its prototypical meaning through dictionary definitions and native speaker judgments. Second, we examined its radial structure — the extended, peripheral, and metaphorical senses it acquires in authentic textual contexts. Third, we compared the conceptual metaphors activated in each language and noted points of convergence and divergence.

The analysis was conducted in close dialogue with the theoretical frameworks outlined in Section 2. Where we identified culturally specific conceptual structures with no parallel in the other language, we treated this as evidence of cognitive divergence rather than translational gap.

Results

In English, the wish-desire lexical field is organized around a clear prototypical core: the verb want, which encodes a direct, often immediate volitional state directed at an obtainable object or outcome. Want is semantically neutral with respect to feasibility or moral loading — one can want something realistic or impossible, mundane or morally complex, without the word itself passing judgment.

Radiating outward from this core, wish encodes a volitional state directed toward something perceived as unlikely or counterfactual — a distinction formalized in English grammar through the subjunctive mood (I wish I were; I wish it would stop). This counterfactual orientation distinguishes wish sharply from want and positions it closer to the realm of imagination and longing than action.

Further along the radial structure, desire carries an intensified meaning — it implies stronger, often more intimate or visceral longing — while hope introduces an epistemic element: the speaker considers the desired outcome possible, though not guaranteed. The verbs yearn, long for, and crave occupy more peripheral positions, each adding specific connotative layers: yearn suggests duration and emotional depth; long for implies distance from the desired object; crave implies physical or compulsive need.

At the conceptual metaphor level, English encodes desire primarily through the source domain of HUNGER and HEAT: to crave, to burn with desire, to hunger for success. These metaphors

construe desire as an internal bodily force — urgent, self-directed, and requiring satisfaction. This framing aligns with a broadly individualistic cognitive model in which the desiring subject is the autonomous locus of experience.

The Uzbek wish-desire field presents a strikingly different internal organization. The central unit, orzu, encodes not simply a wish or desire but a deeply cherished aspiration — typically oriented toward the future, often grand in scope, and imbued with emotional intensity. Orzu is not a casual want; it is the kind of longing one nurtures over a lifetime. In classical Uzbek literature and contemporary speech alike, orzu carries spiritual and communal overtones: it is the aspiration of a poet, a parent's dream for a child, a nation's collective hope.

Istak, by contrast, maps more closely onto English want — it encodes a more immediate, personal desire, typically directed at a concrete and achievable object. Yet even istak carries a degree of restraint absent from English want; in Uzbek cultural scripts, openly expressing istak too forcefully can be perceived as immodest or impatient.

Umid (hope) occupies a particularly important position in the Uzbek conceptual field. Unlike English hope, which is relatively neutral in its epistemic loading, Uzbek umid carries a strong cultural weight: it implies patient trust, often with a spiritual dimension, that the desired outcome will arrive in its proper time. The proverb Umid — umrning yarmi ('Hope is half of life') reflects this cognitive framing, in which hope is not merely a mental attitude but a sustaining life force.

Armon, which has no precise English equivalent, encodes the lingering regret of an unfulfilled wish — a desire that was never realized and that leaves a trace of gentle sorrow. In English, one might approximate armon with phrases such as a lifelong regret or an unfulfilled longing, but no single lexeme captures the blend of wistfulness, acceptance, and depth that armon conveys. This semantic gap is itself cognitively significant: the existence of a dedicated lexeme suggests that Uzbek speakers conceptualize this emotional state as a distinct and culturally salient experience.

At the level of conceptual metaphor, Uzbek organizes desire primarily through LIGHT and JOURNEY metaphors: orzu — bu yo'l ('desire is a road'), and the widespread image of longing as a distant light guiding one through darkness. These source domains construe desire as directional, patient, and communally embedded — a path one walks rather than a fire one must extinguish. The table below summarizes the key cognitive and cultural dimensions along which the English and Uzbek wish-desire fields diverge.

Dimension	English	Uzbek
Prototypical core	want (immediate, neutral)	orzu (aspirational, culturally deep)
Counterfactual longing	wish (grammaticalized)	armon (culturally specific lexeme)
Hope	hope (epistemic, neutral)	umid (patient, spiritual trust)
Primary metaphor	DESIRE IS HUNGER / HEAT	DESIRE IS A JOURNEY / LIGHT
Cultural model	Individualistic, achievement-oriented	Communal, patience-centered
Culturally unique item	—	armon (untranslatable regret-longing)

Table 1. Cognitive and cultural dimensions of the English and Uzbek wish-desire lexical fields.

Discussion

The findings presented in Section 4 support our central claim that wish and desire are not universal cognitive primitives but culturally shaped conceptual structures. The differences we observe between English and Uzbek are not merely matters of vocabulary; they reflect divergent ways of experiencing, valuing, and communicating the inner life of wanting.

The contrast between English's hunger-and-heat metaphors and Uzbek's journey-and-light metaphors is particularly telling. The English framing positions desire as an internal, embodied urgency — something that demands immediate resolution.

This aligns with findings in cross-cultural psychology that link individualistic cultural frameworks with a stronger emphasis on personal agency and goal pursuit (Triandis, 1995). The Uzbek framing, by contrast, construes desire as something to be carried patiently, oriented toward a distant horizon that may or may not be reached within a lifetime — a framing consistent with the communal, long-term orientation characteristic of many Central Asian cultural traditions.

The existence of armon as a dedicated lexeme for unfulfilled, quietly accepted longing deserves particular attention. The fact that English has no single-word equivalent is not simply a lexical accident; it reflects a cognitive model in which unresolved desire is not typically accorded a stable, named emotional category. In Uzbek, armon is a legitimate — even valued — dimension of human emotional experience, one that literature and oral tradition have long explored and dignified.

These findings are consistent with Wierzbicka's (1992) argument that emotional and volitional vocabulary is among the most culturally sensitive areas of any language. They also support Kövecses's (2000) cross-linguistic work on emotion metaphors, which demonstrated that while some metaphorical mappings appear to be universal (desire as heat), others are culture-specific (desire as a road one walks patiently).

From the perspective of cognitive-linguistic theory, our analysis reinforces the view that radial category structures are not merely formal devices but carry genuine cultural information. The way a language extends from the core of a category — what gets included, what remains peripheral, what receives its own lexeme — reflects the shared experiential and evaluative schemas of its speech community.

We also note a pedagogical implication: second-language learners of English and Uzbek who approach wish-desire vocabulary through direct translation equivalents will inevitably miss the cognitive and cultural depth encoded in units such as armon or yearn. A cognitive-linguistic approach to vocabulary instruction — one that teaches words in relation to their conceptual metaphors and cultural scripts — would better prepare learners to use these lexemes with genuine communicative competence.

In this article, we set out to examine the cognitive-linguistic structure of wish and desire vocabulary in English and Uzbek, and we have argued that the differences between the two languages are not merely lexical but conceptual and cultural. Through the frameworks of prototype theory, radial categories, and conceptual metaphor, we traced how each language organizes the semantic field of volitional experience, identified the cultural models that underlie these organizations, and highlighted the cognitive significance of cross-linguistic asymmetries — most notably the existence in Uzbek of armon, a lexical unit with no English equivalent.

Our central finding is that English construes wish and desire primarily through a cognitive model of individual urgency and bodily need, while Uzbek encodes these states through a model of patient aspiration, communal hope, and graceful acceptance of what remains unrealized. These are not trivial stylistic differences; they reflect distinct ways of being in the world, of experiencing time, agency, and the relationship between the self and what it longs for.

We acknowledge the limitations of the present study. Our analysis is qualitative and based on a selected corpus; a larger, quantitatively grounded investigation would strengthen the generalizability of the findings. Future research might also extend the comparison to other Turkic languages, examine diachronic shifts in the cognitive structure of these lexical fields, or investigate how Uzbek-English bilinguals negotiate between the two conceptual systems in their daily use.

Despite these limitations, we believe the present work makes a meaningful contribution. It demonstrates that cognitive-linguistic frameworks are productive tools for comparative lexicology, that the English-Uzbek language pair yields rich and theoretically significant data, and that the study of volitional vocabulary opens a productive window onto the interplay of language, culture, and mind.

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