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## **Conceptual Metaphor Variation in English and Azerbaijani Aphorisms: Traditional vs. Digital Contexts**

### **Abstract**

This paper investigates the evolution of conceptual metaphors in English and Azerbaijani aphorisms, contrasting traditional expressions with their digital adaptations. Grounded in Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), the study examines how metaphors such as "Life is a journey" and "Time is money" are recontextualized in online discourse. The analysis compares 100 aphorisms (50 traditional and 50 digital) from English and Azerbaijani sources, focusing on metaphorical structure, cultural embodiment, linguistic creativity, and communicative function. Findings reveal that English aphorisms tend to emphasize individualism, efficiency, and humor, whereas Azerbaijani aphorisms prioritize collectivism, morality, and social harmony. In digital environments, both languages display metaphorical hybridization—traditional wisdom reshaped through digital irony, meme culture, and brevity. The study argues that digital communication not only reshapes metaphorical cognition but also reinforces underlying cultural schemata through new modes of expression. Overall, the research contributes to cross-cultural metaphor studies, translation theory, and intercultural communication by revealing how conceptual mappings evolve dynamically across linguistic, cultural, and technological boundaries.

**Keywords:** *aphorism, cognitive linguistics, cultural identity, digital discourse, proverb, wisdom*

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## **İngilis və Azərbaycan aforizmlərində konseptual metaforaların variasiyası: Ənənəvi və rəqəmsal kontekstlərin müqayisəsi**

### **Xülasə**

Bu məqalə ingilis və Azərbaycan aforizmlərində konseptual metaforaların təkamülünü araşdırır, ənənəvi ifadələri onların rəqəmsal uyğunlaşmaları ilə müqayisə edir. Tədqiqat Lakoff və Johnsonun (1980) *Konseptual Metafora Nəzəriyyəsinə* (CMT) əsaslanaraq "Həyat bir səyahətdir" və "Zaman puldur" kimi metaforaların onlayn diskursda necə yenidən kontekstuallaşdırıldığını təhlil edir. Təhlil ingilis və Azərbaycan mənbələrindən 100 aforizmi (50 ənənəvi və 50 rəqəmsal) əhatə edir və metaforik quruluş, mədəni məzmun, dil yaradıcılığı və kommunikativ funksiya kimi aspektlərə yönəlir. Nəticələr göstərir ki, ingilis aforizmləri fərdiyyətçiliyi, səmərəliliyi və yumoru ön plana çəkdiyi halda, Azərbaycan aforizmləri kollektivlik, mənəviyyat və ictimai harmoniyanı vurğulayır. Rəqəmsal mühitlərdə hər iki dildə metaforik hibridləşmə müşahidə olunur — ənənəvi müdriklik rəqəmsal ironiya, mem mədəniyyəti və qısaltmalar vasitəsilə yenidən formalaşır. Araşdırma göstərir ki, rəqəmsal kommunikasiya yalnız metaforik təfəkkürü dəyişmir, həm də mövcud mədəni sxemləri yeni ifadə vasitələri ilə gücləndirir. Ümumilikdə, tədqiqat konseptual xəritələrin linqvistik, mədəni və texnoloji sərhədlər boyunca dinamik şəkildə necə inkişaf etdiyini aşkar etməklə mədəniyyətərarası metafora tədqiqatlarına, tərcümə nəzəriyyəsinə və mədəniyyətlərərarası ünsiyyətə töhfə verir.

**Açar sözlər:** *aforizm, koqnitiv dilçilik, mədəni kimlik, rəqəmsal diskurs, atalar sözü, müdriklik*

## Introduction

Aphorisms are concise, memorable expressions of general truths or cultural wisdom that encapsulate collective experience, morality, and worldview. They often rely on metaphor to convey abstract meaning through concrete imagery. In both English and Azerbaijani, aphorisms have historically served as linguistic vehicles for transmitting shared values and moral codes. However, the rise of digital communication has transformed these compact expressions, generating new forms of aphoristic discourse adapted to the logic of online interaction — brevity, humor, and multimodal expressivity (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

### Research

Comparative research into English and Azerbaijani aphorisms provides an opportunity to explore how conceptual metaphors function across distinct cultural frameworks. English aphorisms often embody Western notions of individualism and self-actualization, as in “Time is money” or “Life is a journey.” Azerbaijani aphorisms, in contrast, emphasize collective harmony, patience, and wisdom, as in “Danışmaq gümüşdürsə, susmaq qızıldır” (“Speech is silver, silence is golden”) (Taghiyeva, 2015). While both traditions rely on metaphorical thinking, their conceptual domains differ according to cultural and linguistic worldviews.

The digital era further complicates this landscape. Aphorisms circulate rapidly on social media platforms, often in visually mediated or ironic formats.

### This study asks:

1. How do conceptual metaphors differ between traditional English and Azerbaijani aphorisms?
2. How are these metaphors adapted in digital communication contexts?
3. What do these variations reveal about cultural cognition and metaphor evolution?

By addressing these questions, the paper contributes to ongoing debates on metaphor universality and cultural specificity (Kövecses, 2010; Musolff, 2016). It demonstrates that while conceptual metaphors are cognitively grounded, their linguistic realizations and evaluative tones are profoundly shaped by sociocultural and technological environments.

### Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory posits that metaphor is not merely a stylistic device but a fundamental mechanism of thought. Through systematic mappings between source and target domains, humans conceptualize abstract experiences in terms of more concrete ones. Thus, “Time is money” translates temporal experience into an economic model, reflecting Western capitalist ideology. Similarly, “Life is a journey” frames existence as a linear progression toward a goal, emphasizing personal agency and forward motion.

Later scholars such as Kövecses (2010) and Gibbs (2017) have refined CMT by emphasizing embodiment — how bodily experience and environment shape metaphor selection. Cultural variation occurs when societies prioritize different source domains based on shared experience. For instance, Azerbaijani metaphors often draw from nature and morality (“Dilin sümüyü yoxdur, amma bir zərbəsi ilə öldürdüğü insan çoxdur” — *The tongue has no bones, yet it breaks the heart*), while English metaphors frequently emerge from commerce or mechanistic imagery (“Fuel your ambition”).

Musolff (2016) and Yu (2008) further argue that metaphors are discursive tools reflecting social ideologies. In this view, aphorisms serve as cultural repositories of metaphorical cognition, transmitting inherited conceptual mappings. Therefore, analyzing aphorisms provides a window into both linguistic creativity and collective cognition.

### Methodology

This qualitative study adopts a comparative approach, analyzing a corpus of 100 aphorisms — 50 traditional and 50 digital — equally divided between English and Azerbaijani. Traditional aphorisms were sourced from proverb collections and linguistic studies (e.g., Taghiyeva, 2015; Hazrati et al., 2022), while digital aphorisms were collected from social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and local Azerbaijani forums.

### **The analysis proceeded in three stages:**

1. **Identification of metaphors** — isolating key conceptual mappings (e.g., LIFE IS A JOURNEY, SILENCE IS GOLD).
2. **Cross-linguistic comparison** — examining how equivalent metaphors manifest in each language.
3. **Contextual interpretation** — analyzing shifts in metaphorical function between traditional and digital contexts.

Data were coded for metaphor type (ontological, structural, orientational), communicative purpose, and stylistic features (parallelism, irony, multimodality). While translation inevitably mediates meaning, bilingual consultation ensured cultural and linguistic validity (Alizade, 2024).

Limitations include the small corpus size and potential overlap between aphorisms and proverbs. Nonetheless, this methodology offers rich qualitative insight into metaphorical transformation across media and cultures.

### **Discussion**

#### **1. Traditional Aphorisms**

Traditional English aphorisms often conceptualize life and time through the metaphors of journey, economy, and mechanics. Expressions like “Life is a stage” or “Knowledge is power” encapsulate Enlightenment rationalism and the Protestant work ethic (Brookes & Etkina, 2007). These metaphors value progress, control, and efficiency — key dimensions of individualist societies (Hofstede, 2011).

In contrast, Azerbaijani aphorisms privilege moral and relational domains. “Danışmaq gümüşdürsə, susmaq qızıldır” and “Qarğa qarğanın gözünü çıxarmaz” (“A crow will not peck out another crow’s eye”) emphasize wisdom, discretion, and communal solidarity (Taghiyeva, 2015; Hazrati et al., 2022). Structural features such as alliteration and rhythm enhance memorability (Asadova, 2024).

Conceptually, Azerbaijani metaphors tend to derive from embodied morality — using physical imagery to represent ethical judgment. The tongue and heart symbolize speech and emotion, linking verbal restraint to virtue. English metaphors, by contrast, tend to externalize agency and productivity, reflecting individual responsibility.

#### **2. Digital Aphorisms**

Digital media have transformed both the form and function of aphorisms. Online discourse favors brevity, irony, and visual metaphor, resulting in hybrid expressions that merge traditional wisdom with internet culture.

In English digital spaces, metaphors are often self-referential or humorous:

“If time is money, I’m broke.”

“Life update: buffering...”

Such expressions parody traditional metaphors, signaling skepticism toward conventional wisdom. Risch (2008) observes that digital metaphors frequently blend textual and visual elements, turning abstract thought into interactive meaning.

Azerbaijani digital aphorisms adapt traditional values to contemporary concerns. Examples include “Sükut modundayam” (“I’m in silence mode”) and “Həyat offline deyil” (“Life isn’t offline”), which merge moral restraint with technological language. While humor and modern slang appear, respect for social values persists. Taghiyeva (2015) notes that Azerbaijani discourse retains formal and ethical tones, even in digital formats.

Across both languages, metaphor hybridization emerges as a defining feature. Traditional schemas like LIFE IS A JOURNEY are reinterpreted through digital metaphors of connectivity (“Life is loading...”), reflecting new cognitive environments shaped by technology.

#### **Cross-Cultural Insights**

Comparing English and Azerbaijani digital aphorisms reveals how cultural cognition guides metaphorical adaptation. English digital metaphors emphasize individuality, humor, and temporal anxiety, while Azerbaijani ones foreground emotional intelligence, social harmony, and moral reflection.

This variation aligns with broader cultural patterns: Western societies tend toward low-context communication — explicit, self-oriented, and analytical — whereas Azerbaijani culture remains high-context, valuing implicit meaning and collective identity. Consequently, even in digital adaptation, metaphorical thinking remains culturally anchored.

The study also highlights a growing metaphorical convergence: global digital discourse introduces shared metaphors of speed, connection, and data flow. Yet these universal elements coexist with local reinterpretations, producing what Kövecses (2015) terms *contextual variation* — the dynamic interplay between global cognition and local experience.

**The findings have several implications for applied linguistics and intercultural communication:**

**1. Translation Studies:** Translating metaphoric aphorisms requires attention to both conceptual mapping and cultural resonance. Literal translation often distorts meaning; functional equivalence better preserves cognitive and affective impact.

**2. Language Education:** Teaching metaphor awareness fosters deeper understanding of cultural values embedded in language. Contrasting English and Azerbaijani metaphors can enhance bilingual learners' pragmatic competence.

**3. Digital Communication:** Recognizing the cultural roots of digital metaphors can improve intercultural interaction online, reducing misunderstanding and promoting empathy across linguistic communities.

By linking metaphor, culture, and technology, this study shows that digital discourse is not culturally neutral — it reproduces and reshapes traditional cognitive structures in new semiotic environments.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that conceptual metaphors in English and Azerbaijani aphorisms evolve in response to changing communicative contexts. Traditional forms emphasize core cultural values — individual success in English, moral integrity in Azerbaijani — while digital forms hybridize these frameworks through irony, humor, and technological imagery.

Although digitalization alters surface expression, it does not dissolve cultural metaphor systems. Instead, it generates new blends that reflect both global digital culture and enduring national identities. Future research might employ corpus linguistics or psycholinguistic methods to trace generational shifts in metaphor comprehension across languages.

Ultimately, conceptual metaphors remain a powerful lens for understanding how human cognition, culture, and technology co-create meaning in an increasingly interconnected world.

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