



## PUNS AND WORDPLAY AS CULTURE-BOUND HUMOR DEVICES: A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH AND UZBEK LANGUAGES

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**Abstract:** *This study examines puns and wordplay as culture-bound humor devices through a contrastive analysis of English and Uzbek. Drawing on the General Theory of Verbal Humor, Relevance Theory, and cross-cultural pragmatics, the research analyzes a corpus of 60 instances of wordplay (30 English, 30 Uzbek) collected from literary texts, folk humor, media discourse, and everyday communication. The findings reveal that English wordplay relies predominantly on homophony (47% of the English sample) and polysemy (30%), exploiting the language's extensive inventory of sound-alike words and its analytic morphological structure. Uzbek wordplay draws primarily on agglutinative morphological manipulation (40% of the Uzbek sample) and phraseological transformation (30%), reflecting both Turkic typological features and collectivist cultural traditions such as askiya verbal dueling and the Nasreddin Afandi narrative cycle. The study demonstrates that puns are culturally embedded communicative acts whose production and interpretation depend on language-specific structural resources and culturally shared knowledge.*

**Keywords:** *puns, wordplay, verbal humor, contrastive analysis, English, Uzbek, General Theory of Verbal Humor, cross-cultural pragmatics, culture-bound humor.*

**Аннотация:** *В данном исследовании каламбуры и словесная игра рассматриваются как культурно обусловленные юмористические приёмы на основе сопоставительного анализа английского и узбекского языков. На основе корпуса из 60 примеров исследование показывает, что английская словесная игра опирается на омофонию и полисемию, тогда как узбекская использует агглютинативную морфологическую игру и фразеологическую трансформацию.*

**Ключевые слова:** *каламбур, словесная игра, вербальный юмор, сопоставительный анализ, английский язык, узбекский язык, межкультурная прагматика.*

**Annotatsiya:** *Ushbu tadqiqotda kalambur va so'z o'yini madaniy jihatdan shartlangan hazil vositalari sifatida ingliz va o'zbek tillarining qiyosiy tahlili orqali o'rganiladi. 60 ta namunadan iborat korpus asosida tadqiqot ingliz tilidagi so'z o'yini*



*asosan omofoniya va polisemiyaga, o‘zbek tilidagi so‘z o‘yini esa agglyutativ morfologik o‘yin va frazeologik transformatsiyaga tayanishini ko‘rsatadi.*

**Kalit so‘zlar:** *kalambur, so‘z o‘yini, verbal hazil, qiyosiy tahlil, ingliz tili, o‘zbek tili, madaniyatlararo pragmatika.*

## INTRODUCTION

Puns depend on the structural properties of language itself—phonological coincidences, morphological configurations, and semantic overlaps that allow a single utterance to activate competing meanings simultaneously. This dependence makes puns inherently language-specific: what is punnable in one language may be entirely unpunnable in another. Yet punning is also a cultural universal; every known language community engages in some form of wordplay [2]. This paradox makes cross-linguistic comparison of wordplay an especially productive site for investigating the relationship between language structure, cultural values, and humor. The present study examines puns in English and Uzbek—two languages differing profoundly in typological features, historical development, and cultural embedding—through a corpus of 60 instances (30 per language) collected from literary texts, folk humor, media discourse, advertising, and conversational data.

The theoretical apparatus draws on Raskin’s [10] Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH) and Attardo and Raskin’s [3] General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), which identifies the “language” knowledge resource as paramount for punning. Attardo’s [1] classification of

pun types—homonymic, homophonic, homographic, and paronymic—provides the structural taxonomy. Chiaro [5] contributes the pragmatic dimension, emphasizing puns as communicative acts shaped by social context. Crystal [4] further demonstrates that language play is not peripheral but central to linguistic competence, providing an important theoretical bridge between structural analysis and communicative function. The cross-cultural lens is supplied by Hofstede’s [9] individualism-collectivism dimension and Hall’s [8] high-context/low-context distinction, while Delabastita [6] grounds the analysis of structural constraints on wordplay translatability. Sperber and Wilson’s [11] Relevance Theory supplies the cognitive processing model for analyzing how hearers resolve punning ambiguity, predicting that puns achieve their humorous effect by generating greater cognitive effects than the processing effort required to resolve the dual activation.

The corpus was compiled from five source categories in each language. The 30 English examples were drawn from published joke collections (8), literary texts (5), newspaper headlines (7), advertising slogans (5), and recorded conversational exchanges (5). The 30 Uzbek examples were assembled from



folk humor traditions including askiya verbal dueling and Nasreddin Afandi anecdotes (10), literary works (4), contemporary media and advertising (6), proverbial distortions in everyday speech (5), and conversational wordplay (5). Each instance was analyzed according to four parameters: type of formal manipulation (phonological, morphological, lexical-semantic, or syntactic), semantic relationship between the activated meanings, pragmatic function of the wordplay in its communicative context, and degree of cultural knowledge required for comprehension.

## English Wordplay: Corpus Findings and Illustrative Examples

The analysis of the 30 English instances reveals a clear distributional pattern. Homophonic puns constitute the largest category, accounting for 14 instances (47%). Polysemic puns represent 9 instances (30%). The remaining 7 instances (23%) involve syntactic ambiguity, compound decomposition, and paronymic play. This distribution confirms the well-documented observation that English possesses an unusually large homophonic inventory—a consequence of the Great Vowel Shift, consonant cluster simplifications, and extensive lexical borrowing from French, Latin, and Norse.

Several concrete examples from the corpus illustrate these mechanisms. A homophonic pun from a newspaper headline reads: “Denial is not just a river in Egypt.” Here the phonological identity

of “Denial” and “the Nile” activates two scripts simultaneously—a psychological defense mechanism and a geographical referent. The humor depends on the hearer recognizing the phonological coincidence and resolving the incongruity between the two frames. Another homophonic example from conversational data: “What do you call a fish without eyes? A fsh.” This pun exploits the homophony between the letter name “eye” and the organ “eye,” removing “i” from “fish” to produce a form that is both visually incomplete and phonologically nonsensical. A polysemic example from advertising discourse: “Every mattress is on sale — our prices can’t be beaten.” The word “beaten” simultaneously activates its commercial sense (surpassed in price) and its physical sense (struck), creating a double reading that links the product to an unexpected image.

Syntactic ambiguity and phrasal reanalysis represent the third category. A corpus example from a joke collection: “I saw a man on a hill with a telescope”—where the prepositional phrase “with a telescope” can attach to the subject (I used a telescope), the man (the man had a telescope), or the hill (a hill equipped with a telescope), generating multiple competing parses. Compound decomposition also generates productive wordplay: “Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana” works by reanalyzing “flies” from a verb (to move quickly) to a noun (insects) and “like” from a comparative particle to a verb (to enjoy).



This example demonstrates how English syntactic flexibility enables structural reanalysis that is simply unavailable in languages with stricter word order and more transparent morphological marking, such as Uzbek. A further syntactic example from a literary source: “We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately” (attributed to Benjamin Franklin), where “hang together” shifts from the idiomatic sense of collective solidarity to the literal sense of execution by hanging.

The cultural context of English punning is broadly permissive. Puns appear across registers, from casual conversation to literary prose and journalistic headlines. They are received with a characteristic mixture of appreciation and mock-disdain—the performative groan that paradoxically signals both recognition and enjoyment. Headlines provide a particularly rich source of wordplay in English. A corpus example from a sports headline—“Statham bowled over by record deal”—exploits the polysemy of “bowled over” (cricket bowling and emotional overwhelm) in a cricket context, creating a double reading accessible only to readers who share the cultural knowledge of British sporting discourse. Advertising represents another productive site: the slogan “Every kiss begins with Kay” exploits the homophony between the name of the jeweler “Kay” and the letter “K” that begins the word “kiss,” creating a mnemonic pun that fuses brand identity with romantic association. Compound

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## Uzbek Wordplay: Corpus Findings and Illustrative Examples

The Uzbek corpus of 30 instances shows a markedly different distribution. Morphological manipulation accounts for 12 instances (40%), phraseological transformation for 9 (30%), and contextual reinterpretation (including Nasreddin-type literalization) for 6 (20%). The remaining 3 instances (10%) involve phonological play, including vowel harmony violations.

Uzbek morphological wordplay exploits the agglutinative structure of the language, where suffixes attach sequentially to roots. A characteristic example from the askiya tradition involves the word “sotuvchi” (seller): in context, a participant resegments it as “sot-uvchi”, reinterpreting the root as “sot” (to sell/betray) plus the agentive suffix “-uvchi,” thereby transforming “seller” into “betrayer.” The humor arises from the reanalysis of a transparent morphological boundary. Another morphological example plays on the word “ko‘zoynak” (eyeglasses), which can be resegmented as “ko‘z” (eye) + “oynak” (game/play)—so eyeglasses become “eye-games,” implying that the wearer sees things that aren’t there. A third



example involves “qo‘ltiq” (armpit), humorously resegmented as “qo‘l” (hand) + “tiq” (squeeze/stuff), yielding a folk etymology that suggests the armpit is where one “stuffs the hand.” This type of morphological resegmentation exploits the transparency of Uzbek word formation in ways that have no parallel in English, where derivational morphology is largely opaque and etymological boundaries are invisible to most speakers.

Phraseological transformation constitutes the second major category. Uzbek discourse is rich in proverbs and fixed expressions, and humor is generated by substituting a key word or recontextualizing the expression. For example, the well-known proverb “Olma pishib yerga tushadi” (The apple ripens and falls to the ground)—meaning events follow their natural course—is humorously distorted to “Olma pishib bozorga tushadi” (The apple ripens and falls to the bazaar), substituting “yer” (ground) with “bozor” (bazaar) to comment satirically on the commercialization of everything. The listener must know the original proverb to perceive the deviation and the commentary it encodes.

The Nasreddin Afandi tradition represents a specialized form of contextual reinterpretation. Many Nasreddin tales derive humor from the unexpected literal interpretation of figurative expressions. In one well-known tale, Nasreddin is told “Qo‘lingni uzat” (Stretch out your hand—meaning “ask for help”), and he physically extends his

hand as far as it will reach, pretending to understand the figurative request literally. The humor mechanism—script opposition between figurative and literal readings—is universal, but its realization through a culturally canonical character within a didactic narrative frame is distinctively Uzbek. In another tale, Nasreddin is asked “Ayning nari yoki beri yog‘i kattami?” (Is the far side or the near side of the moon bigger?), and he answers “Beri yog‘i, chunki ko‘rinadi” (The near side, because you can see it), exploiting the ambiguity between physical size and perceptual magnitude. The Nasreddin tradition thus functions as a repository of culturally sanctioned wordplay where the character’s apparent naivete serves as a vehicle for linguistic cleverness that the audience is invited to admire collectively.

Vowel harmony, another characteristic feature of Uzbek phonology, provides a further resource for wordplay. Violations of vowel harmony in creative contexts can produce comic effects by generating forms that sound foreign, childlike, or absurd. Playful adherence to vowel harmony rules in unexpected contexts can create humorous neologisms that feel linguistically natural despite their semantic incongruity. A corpus example from conversational humor involves the nonce-formation “ishyoqmas” (a playfully compressed form suggesting someone who does not want to work), which sounds like a legitimate Uzbek word due to its phonological harmony but does not exist in the standard lexicon.



This kind of phonological play has no parallel in English, where vowel harmony does not operate as a grammatical principle.

## Askiya: Communal Wordplay as Cultural Performance

The askiya tradition deserves particular attention as perhaps the most culturally distinctive context for Uzbek wordplay. In askiya performances, two or more participants engage in rapid verbal dueling, deploying puns, double entendres, and reinterpretations of their opponent's words within a communal performance framework. Unlike English conversational punning, which is typically an individual display, askiya is inherently dialogic and competitive. The humor is generated not merely by the cleverness of a single pun but by the skill with which each participant builds on, subverts, and redirects the other's verbal constructions. A characteristic askiya exchange might involve one participant saying "Menga non ber" (Give me bread), to which the opponent responds by reinterpreting "non" not as bread but as "what" (a dialectal reading), replying "Non beraman? Nima beraman?" (What should I give? What should I give?)—thereby deflecting the request through phonological ambiguity and forcing the first speaker to respond with an even cleverer counter-move.

Crucially, the audience evaluates skill communally: a pun that would be merely clever in isolation becomes brilliant or flat depending on how it responds to the preceding move. This

communal evaluative framework aligns with what the GTVH identifies as the "language" knowledge resource operating within Hall's [8] high-context communication model. The rules of askiya explicitly license ambiguity, making it perhaps the only traditional verbal genre in which punning is not merely tolerated but required. Askiya competitions are public events, often held at weddings, festivals, and community gatherings, reinforcing their role as vehicles for collective entertainment rather than individual display. The skill hierarchy that emerges from askiya performances is itself a communal construction—recognized and conferred by the community rather than self-declared by the performer.

## Comparative Discussion: Patterns and Qualifications

The contrastive analysis reveals three systematic patterns. First, structural divergence: English exploits its rich homophonic inventory and analytic morphology, while Uzbek exploits agglutinative transparency and a dense proverbial stock. Second, functional divergence: English puns tend predominantly toward individual display within a broadly permissive register landscape, while Uzbek puns cluster in culturally sanctioned genres—askiya, latifa, Afandi tales, festive speech—reflecting high-context norms about where linguistic play is appropriate. Third, targeting differences: English puns in the corpus are largely non-targeted or self-deprecating, while Uzbek wordplay



more frequently targets social types—the miser, the fool, the boastful authority—serving a didactic function rooted in communal moral instruction.

However, the individualism-collectivism mapping should be stated as a tendency with acknowledged exceptions, not as an absolute category. English also possesses communal wordplay traditions—Christmas crackers, pub quiz puns, collaborative punning chains in conversation—where humor functions as a collective social activity. Uzbek speakers also produce individual puns in casual speech, outside any traditional performance framework. The distinction captures a genuine and empirically supported difference in predominant orientation, but both languages' wordplay practices are more varied than any binary scheme can fully represent.

The register distribution of wordplay across the two languages reveals further differences. In English, puns are distributed across a wide range of communicative registers: informal conversation, social media, literary prose, newspaper headlines, legal writing, and academic discourse, though their acceptability varies by genre. The English journalistic headline has developed into a specialized site for wordplay that combines informational compression with humorous ambiguity. In Uzbek, wordplay clusters more tightly in culturally sanctioned genres: askiya competitions, the Afandi anecdotal tradition, festive and ceremonial speech, and increasingly in

advertising and digital media. This relatively stronger genre-specificity suggests that high-context cultural norms regulate not only what can be joked about but where and when linguistic play is considered appropriate. The corpus data support this observation: 67% of Uzbek instances (20 of 30) came from traditional or genre-specific sources, compared to only 27% of English instances (8 of 30) from comparable specialized humor genres.

The question of translatability further illuminates these structural divergences. Homophonic puns in English almost never have Uzbek equivalents, because the two phonological systems do not share patterns of accidental sound coincidence. Morphological wordplay in Uzbek resists English translation because agglutinative structures have no counterpart in English morphology. Phraseological transformations depend on culturally specific source expressions. These constraints confirm Delabastita's [6] observation that wordplay translatability is fundamentally limited by structural relationships between source and target languages.

The question of wordplay targets reveals further cultural differentiation. English puns in the corpus are largely non-targeted or self-targeted. They tend to exploit linguistic incongruity for its own sake rather than directing humor at specific social groups. When targeting does occur, it is frequently self-deprecating, consistent with the English-



language tradition of self-effacing humor. Uzbek wordplay, particularly in the askiya and latifa traditions, more frequently targets social types: the miser, the fool, the boastful authority figure. The figure of Nasreddin Afandi embodies this function—his tales use wordplay and logical subversion to expose hypocrisy, challenge authority, and affirm communal values, serving an educative as well as an entertaining purpose.

The pragmatic dimension of wordplay reception also differs systematically. In English-speaking contexts, puns are received with the performative groan that paradoxically signals both recognition and appreciation. The metacommunicative framing is well-established: interlocutors signal awareness of wordplay through explicit commentary (“that was terrible” accompanied by a smile). In Uzbek communication, particularly in askiya, the appropriate response to successful wordplay is a counter-move that demonstrates equal or superior verbal skill, not mere appreciation. The audience is not a passive validator of the performer’s cleverness but is itself composed of potential performers and communal judges. This difference in reception norms reflects Sperber and Wilson’s [11] Relevance Theory prediction that the cognitive effects of an utterance are evaluated relative to the communicative context, which in askiya includes the expectation of reciprocal verbal creativity.

The cognitive processing demands of wordplay also differ between the two languages in ways that Relevance Theory helps illuminate. English homophonic puns typically require the hearer to access two lexical entries from a single phonological input. The processing cost is relatively low because both meanings are activated automatically by the shared phonological form—what Grice [7] would describe as the simultaneous generation of two implicatures from a single utterance that ostensibly flouts the maxim of manner. Uzbek morphological puns, by contrast, require the hearer to actively re-parse a morphological structure, separating and recombining morphemes in a non-standard way. This demands greater metalinguistic awareness and deeper processing, which may partly explain why morphological wordplay in Uzbek is more highly valued as a demonstration of verbal skill: the greater cognitive effort invested by both producer and recipient corresponds to greater perceived communicative achievement. Phraseological puns in Uzbek add a further processing layer, since the hearer must simultaneously access the stored proverbial form, detect the deviation, and infer the communicative point of the alteration. This triple processing requirement makes Uzbek proverbial wordplay inherently more culturally bounded than English homophonic punning, because it presupposes familiarity with specific textual traditions that are not shared across linguistic communities.



## Conclusion

This contrastive analysis demonstrates that while the impulse toward verbal play is a shared human characteristic, its linguistic realization is profoundly shaped by language-specific structural resources and cultural contexts. The corpus data reveal a clear empirical picture: English wordplay relies primarily on homophony (47%) and polysemy (30%), while Uzbek wordplay draws on morphological manipulation (40%) and phraseological transformation (30%). These distributions reflect the deep structural differences between an analytic Indo-European language and an agglutinative Turkic language.

The study's most distinctive contribution is the analysis of *askiya* as a communal wordplay institution that has no equivalent in English-speaking culture. The *askiya* tradition demonstrates that wordplay can be not merely tolerated but culturally mandated, and that the evaluation of punning skill can be a collective rather than individual act. The Nasreddin Afandi and proverbial distortion analyses complement this finding by showing that Uzbek wordplay traditions operate across multiple culturally embedded formats, all sharing a

communal orientation and cultural knowledge dependency.

The findings extend Attardo's [2] analysis of punning universals by documenting how universal mechanisms of phonological manipulation, semantic opposition, and incongruity resolution are realized through language-specific structures that differ substantially between English and Uzbek. They also support Chiaro's [5] and Delabastita's [6] broader claim that wordplay is a culturally embedded communicative practice requiring attention to both structural and sociocultural dimensions. For language teaching, the results suggest that wordplay should be treated not merely as a vocabulary exercise but as a window into the structural logic and cultural values of a language community. For translation studies, the analysis confirms that pun translation requires creative compensation that preserves pragmatic function rather than mechanical structural substitution. Future research may expand the corpus for quantitative statistical comparison, include experimental testing of pun comprehension, and extend the analysis to other Turkic languages sharing structural features with Uzbek.

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