

SYMMETRIC AND ASYMMETRIC RELATIONS IN THE PERCEPTION OF LANGUAGES WITH DIFFERENT STRUCTURES

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Abstract:

This article examines symmetric and asymmetric relations in the perception of languages belonging to different structural and typological systems. Symmetric relations are manifested through similar semantic functions, universal communicative purposes, equivalent sentence roles, and partially corresponding grammatical categories. Asymmetric relations arise when languages use different lexical, morphological, syntactic, and pragmatic means to represent the same concept or communicative intention. The study is based on a comparative analysis of English, Uzbek, and Russian. These languages differ in their morphological organization, dominant word order, case systems, grammatical gender, article usage, and means of expressing definiteness, politeness, tense, and aspect. The findings indicate that structural symmetry facilitates comprehension and positive language transfer, while asymmetry may cause interference, non-standard constructions, semantic loss, and translation difficulties. However, linguistic asymmetry is not regarded merely as a barrier. It reflects the distinctive cognitive, cultural, and communicative characteristics of each language. The article concludes that the systematic comparison of symmetric and asymmetric relations is important for foreign-language teaching, translation practice, comparative linguistics, and intercultural communication.

Keywords: linguistic symmetry, linguistic asymmetry, language perception, structurally different languages, linguistic typology, language transfer, interference, comparative linguistics, translation.

Introduction

Natural languages share a general communicative function, but they organize linguistic information through different structural systems. Meanings such as time, location, possession, definiteness, modality, quantity, and interpersonal relations can be expressed in every developed language. However, the linguistic devices employed to represent these meanings may differ considerably.

Linguistic typology studies both the common features of languages and the structural variation observed among them. Typological research demonstrates that similarities between languages do not necessarily indicate a historical relationship. They may result from universal communicative needs, cognitive tendencies, language contact, or comparable strategies of grammatical organization (Comrie, 1989; Croft, 2003).

At the same time, languages display extensive diversity in their phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic systems. Evans and Levinson emphasize that linguistic diversity should be treated as an essential source of evidence for understanding language and cognition rather than as a collection of marginal exceptions (Evans & Levinson, 2009).

Symmetry and asymmetry are useful concepts for explaining the relationship between structurally different languages. Symmetry refers to a full or partial correspondence between linguistic meanings, functions, forms, or categories. Asymmetry refers to the absence of direct correspondence between the linguistic units of two or more languages.

The perception of a foreign language is strongly affected by the learner's first language. Learners frequently interpret unfamiliar structures through linguistic categories that already exist in their native language. When the two languages contain comparable patterns, positive transfer may occur. When the systems differ, negative transfer or interference may emerge. Odlin describes language transfer as the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and previously acquired languages (Odlin, 1989).

The purpose of this article is to identify the principal symmetric and asymmetric relations in the perception of English, Uzbek, and Russian and to explain their influence on language learning, translation, and intercultural communication.

Materials and Methods

The study employs descriptive, comparative, contrastive, and interpretative methods. English, Uzbek, and Russian linguistic units are compared at the morphological, syntactic, lexical-semantic, and pragmatic levels.

The selection of these languages is determined by their structural diversity. English is predominantly analytical, Uzbek is predominantly agglutinative, and Russian is commonly described as a synthetic or fusional language. Their grammatical systems therefore provide suitable material for analysing how similar communicative meanings can be expressed through different structural mechanisms.

The research procedure consists of the following stages:

1. identifying comparable linguistic meanings and functions;
2. determining structural correspondences between the three languages;
3. identifying categories without direct equivalents;
4. analysing possible cases of positive and negative transfer;
5. examining the influence of asymmetry on translation;
6. developing pedagogical recommendations based on the comparison.

The examples presented in the tables are based on the comparative interpretation of English, Uzbek, and Russian structures. The tables were compiled by the author using established principles of linguistic typology and language-transfer theory.

Symmetry in language does not always mean that two linguistic forms are completely identical. It may refer to functional equivalence, semantic similarity, structural parallelism, or comparable communicative effects.

For example, English, Uzbek, and Russian all possess linguistic means for expressing:

- affirmation and negation;
- questions and commands;
- past, present, and future reference;
- possibility and obligation;
- possession;
- location and direction;
- comparison;
- interpersonal relationships.

The existence of these functions represents semantic and communicative symmetry. Nevertheless, the grammatical forms used to express them may be asymmetric.

Asymmetry may be observed between form and meaning within a single language as well as between different languages. One grammatical form may perform several functions, while one meaning may be represented by several different forms. In comparative linguistics, asymmetry is particularly visible when a grammatical category in one language has no direct equivalent in another.

Wierzbicka's semantic approach demonstrates that languages contain certain comparable semantic concepts while also developing culturally and linguistically specific meanings. Consequently, lexical equivalence is often partial rather than absolute (Wierzbicka, 1996).

Structural Characteristics of the Compared Languages

English, Uzbek, and Russian differ in their dominant morphological and syntactic organization. Their principal structural features are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. General structural characteristics of English, Uzbek, and Russian

Linguistic feature	English	Uzbek	Russian
Language family	Indo-European, Germanic	Turkic	Indo-European, Slavic
Dominant morphological type	Predominantly analytical	Predominantly agglutinative	Predominantly synthetic and fusional
Neutral word order	Subject–Verb–Object	Subject–Object–Verb	Subject–Verb–Object, but relatively flexible
Grammatical cases	Limited noun-case system	Developed suffix-based case system	Developed inflectional case system
Grammatical gender	Generally absent in nouns	Absent	Masculine, feminine, and neuter
Article system	Definite and indefinite articles	No grammatical articles	No grammatical articles

Main grammatical strategy	Auxiliary verbs, prepositions, and word order	Successive grammatical suffixes	Inflectional endings and agreement
Politeness distinction	Mainly lexical and pragmatic	sen and siz	ты and вы
Verb position	Usually follows the subject	Usually occurs at the end	Relatively flexible
Definiteness	Frequently marked by articles	Expressed through context, word order, pronouns, and case marking	Expressed through context, word order, and pronouns

Source: Compiled by the author based on Comrie (1989), Croft (2003), and Corbett (1991).

The table demonstrates that the three languages can perform similar communicative functions while employing different grammatical mechanisms. This relationship creates functional symmetry and structural asymmetry at the same time.

Semantic Symmetry

Semantic symmetry is observed when words or constructions in different languages refer to comparable objects, actions, qualities, or situations.

Concrete vocabulary often demonstrates relatively clear correspondence:

English	Uzbek	Russian	General meaning
mother	ona	мать / мама	female parent
water	suv	вода	natural liquid
book	kitob	книга	written or printed work
sun	quyosh	солнце	central star of the solar system
to sleep	uxlamoq	спать	to be in a state of sleep

These correspondences assist learners in recognizing basic meanings. However, even where the referential meaning is similar, words may differ in emotional associations, stylistic value, frequency, and cultural connotations.

Functional Symmetry

The three languages contain means for expressing possibility, obligation, desire, permission, and necessity.

Consider the following examples:

Communicative meaning	English	Uzbek	Russian
Possibility	He can come.	U kela oladi.	Он может прийти.
Obligation	She must work.	U ishlashi kerak.	Она должна работать.
Desire	I want to study.	Men o'qishni xohlayman.	Я хочу учиться.
Permission	You may enter.	Kirishingiz mumkin.	Вы можете войти.
Prohibition	You must not smoke.	Chekish mumkin emas.	Курить запрещено.

Source: Author's compilation.

The modal meanings are symmetrical, but their grammatical realization differs. English commonly employs modal verbs, Uzbek frequently combines lexical verbs with auxiliary or modal elements, and Russian uses modal verbs, predicative words, and infinitive constructions.

Symmetry of Semantic Roles

English, Uzbek, and Russian distinguish the semantic roles of agent, action, object, recipient, instrument, place, and time.

For example:

- English: *The student wrote the letter.*
- Uzbek: *Talaba xatni yozdi.*
- Russian: *Студент написал письмо.*

The sentence structures differ in word order and morphological marking, but the semantic roles remain comparable:

Semantic role	English	Uzbek	Russian
Agent	the student	talaba	студент
Action	wrote	yozi	написал
Object	the letter	xatni	письмо

This underlying symmetry is important in translation. A translator first identifies the semantic relations and then reconstructs them according to the rules of the target language.

Asymmetric Relations in the Perception of Different Languages

Word-Order Asymmetry

English generally requires a relatively fixed subject–verb–object order:

The teacher explained the rule.

Uzbek normally places the verb at the end:

O'qituvchi qoidani tushuntirdi.

Russian allows greater flexibility because grammatical relations are frequently marked by case endings:

Учитель объяснил правило.

The components of the Russian sentence may also be rearranged for communicative emphasis:

Правило объяснил учитель.

Although both Russian sentences describe the same basic situation, the information structure and emphasis are not identical.

Asymmetry of Articles and Definiteness

English possesses the indefinite article *a/an* and the definite article *the*. Uzbek and Russian do not have directly corresponding grammatical articles.

Meaning	English	Uzbek	Russian
An unidentified person	I saw a man.	Men bir odamni ko'rdim.	Я увидел одного мужчину.
A previously identified person	I saw the man.	Men o'sha odamni ko'rdim.	Я увидел того мужчину.
General reference	A teacher should be patient.	O'qituvchi sabrli bo'lishi kerak.	Учитель должен быть терпеливым.

Source: Author's compilation.

The Uzbek words *bir* and *o'sha* and the Russian words *один* and *тот* may express meanings similar to English articles in certain contexts. Nevertheless, they are not complete grammatical equivalents of the English article system.

This asymmetry may cause Uzbek- and Russian-speaking learners to omit articles:

- Incorrect: *I bought book.*
- Correct: *I bought a book.*

It may also result in the unnecessary use of an article where English requires no article:

- Incorrect: *The education is important.*
- Correct: *Education is important.*

Asymmetry of Grammatical Gender

Russian classifies nouns as masculine, feminine, or neuter. Adjectives, pronouns, and some verb forms agree with nouns according to gender. English and Uzbek do not have a comparable grammatical gender system for nouns.

Corbett explains that grammatical gender is a noun-classification system reflected through agreement between words in a sentence. Gender assignment may depend on semantic and formal criteria and may vary substantially across languages (Corbett, 1991).

Examples include:

Russian	Gender	English	Uzbek
новый дом	Masculine	new house	yangi uy
новая книга	Feminine	new book	yangi kitob
новое окно	Neuter	new window	yangi deraza

In Russian, the adjective changes from *новый* to *новая* or *новое*. In English and Uzbek, the adjective does not change according to the grammatical gender of the noun.

For Uzbek-speaking learners, Russian gender agreement may be difficult because this grammatical category is absent from Uzbek. Learners are required to acquire not merely new endings but a new system of noun classification.

Asymmetry of Case Systems

Uzbek and Russian have developed case systems, whereas modern English relies mainly on prepositions and word order to express grammatical relations.

Table 2. Comparison of selected case meanings

Grammatical meaning	English	Uzbek	Russian
Possession	of the student / the student's	talabani	студента
Direction	to the school	maktabga	в школу
Location	at school	maktabda	в школе
Source	from school	maktabdan	из школы
Direct object	I read the book.	Men kitobni o'qidim.	Я прочитал книгу.
Instrument	with a pen	ruchka bilan	ручкой

Source: Author's compilation based on Comrie (1989) and Croft (2003).

In Uzbek, grammatical meanings are generally expressed through clearly distinguishable suffixes attached successively to a word. In Russian, case endings may combine several grammatical meanings, including number, gender, and case. In English, comparable meanings are commonly expressed through prepositions, possessive forms, and word order.

Lexical-Semantic Asymmetry

Lexical asymmetry occurs when the semantic scope of a word in one language does not correspond exactly to the semantic scope of a word in another language.

Table 3. Examples of lexical-semantic asymmetry

Concept	English	Uzbek	Russian	Type of asymmetry
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Father's brother	uncle	amaki	дядя	Uzbek provides a more specific term
Mother's brother	uncle	tog'a	дядя	Uzbek provides a more specific term
Informal singular address	you	sen	ты	English does not grammatically distinguish the form
Formal or plural address	you	siz	вы	Uzbek and Russian mark politeness and number
Older sister	sister	opa	старшая сестра	Uzbek uses a separate lexical unit
Younger sister	sister	singil	младшая сестра	Uzbek uses a separate lexical unit
Older brother	brother	aka	старший брат	Uzbek uses a separate lexical unit
Younger brother	brother	uka	младший брат	Uzbek uses a separate lexical unit

Source: Author's compilation.

The English words *uncle*, *sister*, *brother*, and *you* are semantically broader than their Uzbek equivalents. A translator working from English into Uzbek must use contextual information to select the correct word.

For example, the sentence *My uncle arrived yesterday* cannot always be translated accurately into Uzbek without knowing whether the person is the speaker's *amaki* or *tog'a*. Translating both as *amaki* would add information that may not be present in the original.

Asymmetry in the Expression of Tense and Aspect

The three languages use different systems for representing the temporal structure of events.

Meaning	English	Uzbek	Russian
Completed past action	I wrote the letter.	Men xatni yozdim.	Я написал письмо.
Ongoing past action	I was writing the letter.	Men xat yozayotgan edim.	Я писал письмо.
Completed action relevant to the present	I have written the letter.	Men xatni yozib bo'ldim.	Я написал письмо.
Repeated past action	I used to write letters.	Men ilgari xatlar yozardim.	Раньше я писал письма.

Source: Author's compilation.

English expresses many aspectual distinctions through combinations of auxiliary verbs and participles. Russian frequently uses lexical aspectual pairs, while Uzbek employs tense suffixes, participles, auxiliary verbs, and contextual markers.

The systems overlap, but they do not correspond completely. Consequently, mechanical replacement of forms may result in grammatically correct but contextually inappropriate translations.

Native-Language Influence on Foreign-Language Perception

Language perception is an active interpretative process. Learners do not approach the target language without previous linguistic experience. They analyse new forms through the categories and patterns already established in their first language.

Odlin's language-transfer theory indicates that similarities can facilitate acquisition, while differences can increase the possibility of errors, avoidance, and overgeneralization (Odlin, 1989).

Slobin's "thinking for speaking" approach suggests that speakers become accustomed to paying attention to those aspects of experience that their language regularly requires them to encode. Different languages may therefore encourage speakers to select and organize information differently during speech production (Slobin, 1996). For instance, an English speaker must frequently decide whether a noun is definite or indefinite because article selection is grammatically required. A Russian speaker must determine the grammatical gender and case of nouns. An Uzbek speaker must select appropriate case suffixes and distinguish between informal and respectful forms of address.

Table 4. Examples of language transfer and interference

Native-language pattern	Possible learner error	Correct English form	Cause
Uzbek sentences may omit a present-tense copula	He a student.	He is a student.	Omission of the English verb to be
Uzbek commonly places the verb at the end	I the book read.	I read the book.	Transfer of subject-object-verb order
Uzbek and Russian lack grammatical articles	I bought new phone.	I bought a new phone.	Article omission
Russian does not use do in questions	You know him?	Do you know him?	Absence of a comparable auxiliary pattern
Uzbek uses one form for natural and grammatical gender	My sister said he was tired.	My sister said she was tired.	Pronoun-selection interference
Russian uses the present tense after certain time expressions	I live here for five years.	I have lived here for five years.	Tense and aspect mismatch

Source: Author's compilation based on Odlin's language-transfer theory.

These errors do not necessarily indicate that learners have failed to understand the intended meaning. In many cases, they demonstrate that a familiar native-language structure has been transferred into the target language.

Symmetry and Asymmetry in Translation

Translation makes linguistic asymmetry particularly visible. A translator cannot always replace a source-language word with a formally similar target-language word. Translation requires the reconstruction of meaning according to the lexical, grammatical, stylistic, and pragmatic norms of the target language.

Jakobson distinguishes between different forms of translation and emphasizes that complete equivalence between linguistic units is rarely possible. The translator frequently conveys the same message through a different combination of linguistic signs (Jakobson, 1959).

Symmetric relations allow relatively direct translation, especially when the source and target languages contain stable equivalents. Such cases may include:

- numbers and measurements;
- geographical names;
- concrete objects;
- internationally recognized terms;
- basic scientific concepts.

Asymmetric relations require translation transformations.

Table 5. Translation strategies for asymmetric linguistic units

Type of asymmetry	Source-language example	Possible translation solution
A broad word corresponds to several specific words	English uncle	Select Uzbek amaki or tog'a according to context
A specific word corresponds to a broader word	Uzbek opa	Translate as older sister or sister, depending on relevance
A grammatical category is absent	English article the	Express definiteness through context, word order, or a demonstrative
Word order differs	English subject–verb–object sentence	Reorganize according to Uzbek subject–object–verb order
A case form has no direct structural equivalent	Uzbek maktabdan	Use the English prepositional phrase from school
Cultural meaning is implicit	Uzbek respectful siz	Use appropriate English politeness markers and context
One form has several functions	English you	Select Uzbek sen, siz, sizlar or Russian ты, вы
Aspectual systems differ	English present perfect	Use an Uzbek or Russian form appropriate to the context rather than translating mechanically

Source: Author's compilation.

Translation transformations may include lexical specification, generalization, grammatical replacement, addition, omission, descriptive translation, contextual substitution, and sentence restructuring.

For example, when translating *uncle* into Uzbek, lexical specification is necessary. When translating *amaki* into English, generalization takes place because the distinction between the father's and mother's sides of the family may be lost.

Thus, translation can be understood as the management of symmetry and asymmetry. The translator preserves comparable meanings while compensating for structural and cultural differences.

Pedagogical Implications

A contrastive understanding of symmetry and asymmetry has considerable value in foreign-language teaching. Learners should not be taught to perceive the target language as a word-for-word version of their native language. Each language should be presented as an independent system with its own grammatical logic.

The following pedagogical activities can be applied:

1. comparing parallel sentences in English, Uzbek, and Russian;
2. identifying grammatical categories that have no direct equivalent;
3. analysing typical interference errors;
4. comparing the semantic range of apparently equivalent words;
5. transforming sentences according to the target-language structure;
6. translating context-dependent lexical units;
7. explaining how politeness is expressed in different languages;
8. examining tense and aspect through communicative situations.

Conclusion

The comparison of English, Uzbek, and Russian demonstrates that structurally different languages contain both symmetric and asymmetric relations.

Symmetry is observed in universal communicative functions, basic semantic categories, comparable sentence roles, and the ability to express time, modality, possession, quantity, and interpersonal relations. Such similarities contribute to comprehension and positive transfer.

Asymmetry appears in word order, article usage, grammatical gender, case systems, lexical classification, politeness distinctions, and the expression of tense and aspect. These differences may cause interference, non-standard constructions, semantic shifts, and translation problems.

However, linguistic asymmetry should not be interpreted only as a difficulty. It reveals the unique structural, cognitive, and cultural organization of each language. Different languages may direct speakers' attention to different aspects of reality during speech production and interpretation.

The systematic study of symmetry and asymmetry can improve foreign-language instruction, translation quality, linguistic competence, and intercultural awareness. Learners and translators should therefore be trained to identify not only formal correspondences but also semantic, grammatical, pragmatic, and cultural differences between languages.

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