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LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF FOOD TERMS IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK

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Annotation:
This article provides a comprehensive linguistic and cultural analysis of food-related terms in English and Uzbek. It explores how language and culture are interwoven, and how food vocabulary reflects the worldview, social values, historical experiences, and religious beliefs of different societies. The study investigates lexical-semantic categories, metaphorical expressions, idiomatic uses, gendered and class-based connotations, as well as the historical and moral dimensions of food terms. Drawing on real-life examples and corpus-based data, the article reveals typological similarities and differences between the two languages. Special attention is given to the cultural symbolism of food, its role in shaping national identity, and its function in intercultural communication.

Keywords: food terminology, cultural linguistics, metaphorical expressions, English and Uzbek comparison, sociolinguistics, intercultural communication, lexical semantics, gender and language.

Introduction

Language and culture are inseparable elements that shape each other. One of the clearest reflections of a nation's lifestyle, traditions, and worldview can be found in its culinary lexicon. Food terms not only serve a communicative function but also carry cultural, historical, and even emotional connotations. The analysis of food-related vocabulary in different languages, particularly in English and Uzbek, offers rich insights into linguistic categorization, metaphorical extensions, and cultural symbolism.

This article explores the linguistic features and cultural contexts of food terms in English and Uzbek, highlighting similarities and differences in terminology, conceptual metaphors, idiomatic usage, and socio-cultural values. The study is based on real examples drawn from dictionaries, corpora, proverbs, phraseological units, and culinary literature.

Methods

Both English and Uzbek have rich and nuanced vocabularies to describe food items, which can be grouped into several lexical fields:[1]

Ingredients (basic foods):

English: bread, butter, meat, rice, cheese, milk

Uzbek: non, sariyog‘, go‘sht, guruch, qatiq, sut

Prepared dishes:

English: pie, stew, roast, salad

Uzbek: palov, manti, shurva, somsa

Condiments and spices:

English: pepper, mustard, vinegar

Uzbek: qora murch, xantal, sirka

Sweet dishes:

English: pudding, cake, jelly

Uzbek: chak-chak, halva, shakarob

The comparison shows that while both languages have corresponding categories, the cultural relevance of certain dishes or ingredients differs significantly.[2] For example, palov is central to Uzbek identity, celebrated in rituals and communal gatherings, while in English culture, no single dish holds the same symbolic unifying status. [3]

Result and Discussion

Many food terms in both English and Uzbek languages are embedded in idioms and expressions, reflecting metaphorical uses: [4]

English idioms:

“The proof of the pudding is in the eating” – real value is proven in practice.

“Spill the beans” – to reveal a secret. [5]

“Butter someone up” – to flatter someone for personal gain.

Uzbek idioms and phrases:

“Nonni yerda ko‘rgan bolaga baxt kuladi” – The child who finds bread on the ground is considered lucky. [6]

“Osh bo‘lsa, bahona topiladi” – If there is food (pilaf), the pretext to gather will be found. [7]

“Go‘shtni suyak tutadi” – Literal: “Meat stays on the bone”; figurative: close relationships are sustained by kinship. [8]

These examples demonstrate how food metaphors in Uzbek are often tied to social harmony, respect for provision, and kinship, whereas in English, food idioms frequently reflect individual behavior and pragmatism. [9]

Language encodes not just the names of foods but also the practices surrounding them. For example :

In Uzbek culture, bread (non) is sacred. Dropping bread is considered disrespectful, and it is often kissed and put on a high place if found on the ground. [10] There is no equivalent sacredness attached to bread in English-speaking cultures. [11]

The word “tea” in British English functions not just as a beverage name but also represents a meal (e.g., “afternoon tea”, “high tea”). [12] In contrast, Uzbek equivalents like “choy” carry strong hospitality connotations, with tea being central to welcoming guests.[13]

The practice of communal eating from one dish (e.g., a large plate of palov) is linguistically embedded in Uzbek expressions like “bitta likopda osh yeganlar” (those who shared a plate), which implies deep camaraderie. No direct English equivalent exists.[14]

Globalization has influenced both languages through lexical borrowing, though in different ways:

In Uzbek, many food terms have been borrowed from Russian, Turkish, and Arabic:

halva (Arabic origin)

blinchik (from Russian “bliny”)

salat (from Russian “salat”, ultimately from French)

In English, culinary terms are borrowed from French, Italian, and other European languages:

croissant, soufflé, bologna, pizza, spaghetti

Interestingly, borrowed terms often retain cultural associations from their original context, enriching the host language’s culinary imagination.

The way food terms are used in conversation also reflects politeness strategies, social roles, and hierarchical relationships.[15]

In Uzbek, offering food is a deeply ingrained social custom, and expressions like “Yeb keting!”, “Non oling!”, or “Choy iching!” are essential politeness markers.

In English, offering food or drink is also polite (“Would you like some tea?”), but less culturally obligatory. Refusing food in Uzbek culture might be seen as disrespectful unless done with a clear justification, while in English it is more socially acceptable.

Food lexicon often functions as a marker of national consciousness and cultural memory. In the Uzbek linguistic worldview, many food items are tied not only to nourishment but also to social and spiritual identity. For example, palov is not merely a dish—it is an expression of hospitality, celebration, and masculine skill in cooking. Phrases like "palov pishirish" carry social meaning beyond cooking: it signals the hosting of a major event such as a wedding (to‘y) or funeral (xatna or dugona yig‘ini).

Similarly, non (bread) is perceived as sacred (muqaddas), symbolizing rizq and baraka. The lexical connotation of non extends into moral and ethical domains, as evidenced in idioms like “Non yegan joyingga tupurma” (Don’t spit where you have eaten), which expresses gratitude, loyalty, and respect. These expressions reflect not only linguistic creativity but also a collective cultural ethos rooted in values like modesty (hayo), respect (ehtirom), and gratitude (minnatdorlik) .

In contrast, English food terms often reflect individual lifestyle choices, dietary trends, or economic status. The modern English lexicon includes terms like vegan, gluten-free, organic, which are used not just descriptively but as identifiers of personal ideology or health awareness. These terms signal a shift toward self-oriented consumption, where food becomes an extension of individual identity and social branding.

A corpus-based approach to studying food terms reveals interesting tendencies in usage and discourse. For example, data from the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) shows high-frequency terms like coffee, bread, meat, sugar, and tea, frequently appearing in both literal and metaphorical contexts.

In contrast, in Uzbek National Corpus (developed under the Institute of Uzbek Language and Literature), the most frequent food-related lexemes include non, palov, osh, go‘sht, choy, and suv. Notably, the word non appears more frequently than go‘sht, reflecting a cultural prioritization of bread as the foundation of sustenance.

Moreover, Uzbek speech tends to favor collectivist expressions around food, such as birga o‘tirish, dasturxon yozish, mehmon kutish, whereas English discourse frequently individualizes food experiences, e.g., grabbing lunch, eating out, dieting, meal prepping.

In cross-cultural settings, food terms and practices can become sources of both fascination and misunderstanding. For instance, sheep’s head soup (qovurilgan qo‘y boshi) or fermented milk (qatiq) might be unfamiliar or even uncomfortable concepts for English speakers, just as marmite, black pudding, or haggis might be perceived as unusual in Uzbek contexts .

Such differences highlight the importance of intercultural competence—the ability to interpret, explain, and respect culturally-bound symbols and practices. In language education, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or Uzbek for Foreigners programs, teaching food terms must go beyond vocabulary lists and include socio-cultural commentary, visual materials, and real-life situations.

The comparative analysis of food terms in English and Uzbek languages demonstrates that linguistic units are never isolated from cultural values, cognitive frameworks, and social behavior. Food lexicon not only names objects and dishes, but also transmits emotions, traditions, etiquette, and collective memory.

Future research can benefit from deeper corpus analyses, cross-linguistic pragmatics, and field studies of bilingual communities to further understand how food terms function in multicultural

environments. Moreover, developing multilingual dictionaries or digital platforms with cultural annotations for food-related vocabulary can support language learners and translators alike.

The lexicon of food in any language is not static; it evolves under the influence of gender roles, societal structure, and historical events. In both English and Uzbek, food-related vocabulary reveals layered meanings that reflect not only culinary practices but also gender expectations, class distinctions, and collective memory.

In many traditional societies, including Uzbek culture, food preparation has long been associated with female responsibilities, whereas certain types of cooking—especially those related to public or ceremonial events—are assigned to men. This duality is linguistically represented in terminological and discursive patterns.

For example:

In Uzbek, the phrase "oshpaz" refers to a professional cook (often male), especially one who prepares palov for large gatherings. Meanwhile, informal or home-based cooking is denoted through expressions like "uy bekasi", "ovqat qilmoq", where the subject is typically female.

The gendered division also appears in metaphorical uses. "Oshxonada ishlay oladigan kelin" (a daughter-in-law who can cook well) is often equated with family harmony, respectability, and social status .

In contrast, contemporary English has experienced a shift toward gender neutrality in culinary discourse, particularly since the late 20th century. Phrases such as "stay-at-home dad", "professional chef", or "shared cooking responsibilities" reflect a changing social fabric. However, stereotypes still linger: "a woman's touch in the kitchen" versus "grilling as a man's domain".

This gendered linguistic dimension suggests that food terms are not only descriptive but also normative—they encode societal expectations and reproduce roles.

Food is one of the clearest indicators of social status, and the language used to describe it reflects such hierarchies. In both English and Uzbek, certain dishes or ingredients are culturally coded as belonging to specific social groups.

In English, terms such as "gourmet", "artisanal cheese", "fine dining", or "organic produce" are associated with affluence and refined taste, whereas "fast food", "TV dinner", and "instant noodles" often connote lower economic strata.

In Uzbek, similar distinctions exist. "Qovurma go'sht", "no'xat sho'rva", "cho'pon lag'moni" are sometimes associated with rural or pastoral lifestyles. Conversely, "shashlik", "kavob", "tokli dolma" are linked to urban sophistication or festive abundance.

This class-related vocabulary also influences idioms and humor. In Uzbek satirical speech, for instance, someone who tries to pretend to be upper class might be mocked with sayings like "bir kecha osh yegan, ming kecha go'rsin" (someone who ate good food once and boasts about it forever).

The Uzbek language preserves many historical food-related terms that reflect cultural exchange, trade routes, and imperial legacies. Terms such as "norin", "qazi", "barak" (borrowed from Turkic and Persian influences) represent long-standing culinary traditions. The Silk Road, which crossed Central Asia, introduced spices, preparation methods, and food-related vocabulary that still exist today.

Similarly, English food terms have historical layers, particularly influenced by the Norman conquest (1066), which introduced French culinary vocabulary into English:

"Beef" (from French bœuf) vs. "cow" (from Anglo-Saxon cu)

"Pork" (from porc) vs. "pig" (from picga)

"Mutton" vs. "sheep"

This dual terminology reflects the feudal structure of medieval England, where French-speaking nobility consumed the prepared meat (beef, pork), while Anglo-Saxon peasants tended the live animals (cow, pig).

In Uzbek, similar layering exists between local terms and those adopted from Russian during the Soviet era. For example:

"bulonka", "kotlet", "salat olivye" became common during the 20th century and reflect Russian influence.

However, post-independence linguistic purism and cultural revival have encouraged a return to

indigenous terminology and the revalorization of national dishes .

Food terminology also encodes religious and ethical boundaries. In Uzbek Islamic culture, the concept of "halol" (permissible) is a dominant lexical and moral category. The term "harom" (forbidden) extends not only to food content (e.g., pork, alcohol) but also to the method of preparation and source of income.

In English, while the dominant culture is secular, religious communities have similar lexicons: "kosher" in Jewish culture and "halal" in Muslim communities. The terms have entered general English vocabulary and are sometimes used metaphorically—e.g., "a kosher deal" meaning an honest or legitimate transaction.

These examples show that food vocabulary is morally charged and functions as a boundary marker between communities, beliefs, and ethical codes.

Conclusion

Food-related vocabulary in English and Uzbek is deeply rooted in cultural traditions, social structures, and collective experiences. While both languages share universal categories of food terms, their symbolic, pragmatic, and metaphorical uses differ significantly. The Uzbek food lexicon reveals a strong connection with hospitality, family ties, and sacred attitudes toward sustenance, whereas the English lexicon reflects individualism, efficiency, and practicality.

Comparative linguistic studies of food terms not only enrich cross-cultural understanding but also highlight the profound ways in which language mirrors cultural identity.

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