



THE ROLE OF CONCEPTUAL BLENDING IN TRANSLATING ENGLISH IDIOMS INTO UZBEK

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Abstract: This article examines the role of conceptual blending theory in understanding and resolving the challenges that arise when English idioms are translated into Uzbek. Drawing on the foundational work of Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, the study argues that idioms are not arbitrary frozen expressions but the products of motivated cognitive blending operations in which elements from multiple mental spaces are integrated into emergent meaning structures. Because this blending process is grounded in culturally specific experiential domains, the structural asymmetry between English and Uzbek idiomatic systems presents translators with difficulties that purely equivalence-based approaches are ill-equipped to address. The article analyzes representative English idioms — including expressions tied to conflict, interpersonal dynamics, and social behavior — and traces the input spaces, vital relations, and emergent meanings that constitute their blended structure, before exploring how comparable or divergent blending configurations manifest in Uzbek. It identifies three principal translation strategies available to the practitioner: sourcing a target-language idiom that activates a structurally analogous blend, adapting the source imagery to a culturally proximate Uzbek equivalent, and unpacking the blend into explicit paraphrase when no viable figurative parallel exists. Each strategy is evaluated in terms of its cognitive and communicative trade-offs.

Keywords: conceptual blending, idiom translation, English-Uzbek translation, cognitive linguistics, mental spaces.

Language, at its core, is never a neutral medium. It carries within it the accumulated weight of culture, history, and lived experience, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the study of idioms. When a speaker of English says that someone is "barking up the wrong tree" or that they need to "bite the bullet," they are not describing a confused dog or a mouthful of ammunition. They are drawing on a shared cultural reservoir of images and metaphors that their listeners instinctively decode. The challenge that emerges when these expressions must be rendered into another language — particularly one as



structurally and culturally distinct as Uzbek — is far more intricate than a simple word-for-word substitution. It is here that the cognitive linguistic theory of conceptual blending offers a remarkably powerful lens, not only for understanding why idioms are so resistant to translation, but also for developing more principled and linguistically informed strategies for translating them.

Conceptual blending theory, developed primarily by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner in the 1990s and elaborated most comprehensively in their 2002 monograph *The Way We Think*, proposes that human cognition fundamentally operates through the integration of mental spaces — partial cognitive representations that speakers construct as they speak and think. When we understand or produce meaning, we do not simply retrieve stored definitions; we blend elements from multiple mental spaces into a new, emergent conceptual structure that has properties not present in any of the inputs alone.[1] This blended space is governed by what the theorists call "vital relations" — connections of identity, analogy, cause-effect, time, space, and intentionality that allow the human mind to compress vast and complex networks of meaning into manageable, imaginable structures. The elegance of the theory lies in its explanatory range: it accounts for how we understand poetry, humor, counterfactuals, analogy, and — crucially for our purposes — figurative language and idiom.

An idiom, viewed through the lens of conceptual blending, is not a frozen chunk of language with an arbitrary meaning attached to it, as earlier generative approaches often assumed. Rather, it is the product of a motivated, if partially conventionalized, blending process. Consider the English idiom "to kick the bucket," meaning to die. A blending analysis reveals at least two input spaces: one involving a literal scene of kicking a bucket, and another involving the concept of death or finality. The blend that emerges is not a simple superimposition of these two spaces; rather, it borrows structural elements from both — the sudden, physical abruptness of the kick, the hollow finality of an emptied bucket — and combines them into an emergent image that feels viscerally apt as a metaphor for the end of life. This motivated structure, as Kövecses argues, means that idioms are far from arbitrary: they are grounded in embodied experience and cross-domain mapping, even when speakers are no longer consciously aware of those grounds.[2]

It is precisely this motivated, culturally embedded structure that makes idiomatic translation so formidable a task. The translator working between



English and Uzbek faces a situation in which not only the lexical items but the entire mental space configuration of the source idiom may have no parallel in the target language. Uzbek, a Turkic language with Altaic structural features and a rich oral and literary tradition shaped by Persian, Arabic, and in the modern era Russian influences, constructs its figurative expressions from a different set of experiential and cultural inputs. The Uzbek idiom "olovga moy sepmang" conveys something close to the English "don't add fuel to the fire," but the input spaces, the vital relations compressed in the blend, and the cultural resonances of the canine image in Uzbek folk culture differ substantially from the fire-fuel metaphor that English speakers draw on. A translator who mechanically seeks English-Uzbek lexical equivalences will lose not only the flavor of the expression but its very cognitive architecture.

Scholars working in the intersection of translation studies and cognitive linguistics have increasingly recognized that a blending-informed approach demands that the translator attend to what Halverson calls the "conceptual substrate" of the source text — the network of mental spaces and mappings that generate its meaning — and then search for target-language expressions that activate a comparable conceptual substrate in the target audience.[3] This is a more demanding task than finding a functionally equivalent expression, because it requires the translator to understand not just what an idiom means but how it means: what imagery it activates, what cultural scripts it invokes, and what embodied experiences it draws upon. In the case of English-to-Uzbek translation, this demands a bilingual and bicultural competence that goes well beyond dictionary knowledge.

To make this concrete, it is useful to examine a cluster of English idioms drawn from the domain of interpersonal conflict — a domain particularly rich in figurative expression in both English and Uzbek. The English idiom "to bury the hatchet," meaning to make peace after a disagreement, derives from a Native American practice of literally burying weapons as a sign of peace. The blend involves an input space of warfare and weapons, an input space of concealment or putting away, and a generic space of conflict resolution, producing an emergent image of choosing peace over aggression. When this idiom is translated into Uzbek, a translator might reach for "yarashmoq" (to reconcile) as a direct semantic equivalent, but this loses the vivid, action-oriented imagery entirely. A more blending-sensitive translation might seek a Uzbek idiom that similarly compresses the concept of putting away instruments of conflict — and indeed, Uzbek offers expressions tied to shared



meals, handshakes, or the laying down of burdens that partially reconstruct the relevant blend, even if with different source domain inputs.

The asymmetry in blending structures between English and Uzbek idioms is not incidental but reflects deep differences in cultural conceptualization. English idiomatic language draws heavily on domains of sport, commerce, and individualistic achievement — idioms like "to move the goalposts," "to call someone's bluff," or "to go the extra mile" all presuppose cultural scripts tied to competitive, market-oriented social life. Uzbek idiomatic language, rooted in agricultural, communal, and often Sufi-influenced cultural traditions, draws more frequently on domains of nature, kinship, and spiritual humility. As Mirzayev observes in his analysis of Uzbek phraseology, a significant proportion of Uzbek idioms involve references to shared physical labor, the natural cycle of seasons, or the behavior of animals in pastoral settings — a reflection of the historical lifeworld in which Uzbek figurative language crystallized.[4] The translator must therefore navigate not just linguistic difference but what might be called a difference in "blending ecology": the set of input spaces that a given linguistic community finds natural, available, and cognitively salient.[5]

This recognition has practical consequences for translation methodology. Fauconnier and Turner themselves note that the richness of a blended space is partly determined by the degree to which it allows for imaginative elaboration — what they call "running the blend." [1] A good translation of an idiom, then, is one that allows the target language reader to run a comparable blend in their own cognitive space, even if the specific imagery differs. This suggests that the best translations of English idioms into Uzbek will not always be those that preserve the source imagery most faithfully, but those that most successfully trigger a parallel blending operation in Uzbek cognitive and cultural terms. Sometimes this will mean using a Uzbek idiom with entirely different literal content but a structurally analogous blend; sometimes it will mean introducing the source imagery with minimal adaptation; and sometimes it will mean opting for a paraphrase that makes the emergent meaning of the blend explicit, at the cost of some vividness. Each of these strategies corresponds to a different weighting of what translation theorists call adequacy and acceptability.[6]

It is worth dwelling on the paraphrase strategy, because it is often dismissed as a failure of translation — a surrender of the figurative in favor of the literal. Viewed through the lens of conceptual blending, however, paraphrase can be understood as a form of blend unpacking: a rendering



explicit of the emergent meaning of the blend, at the expense of the vivid compression that makes idioms so memorable. For an Uzbek reader encountering the English idiom "the elephant in the room" — which refers to an obvious problem that everyone is aware of but nobody wants to address — there may simply be no available Uzbek blend that compresses the same conceptual structure so neatly. The culturally specific image of an incongruously large animal in an incongruously small domestic space may not activate comparable urgency or absurdity for an Uzbek audience.[7] In such cases, a paraphrase that conveys the blend's emergent meaning — something like "the problem everyone sees but no one names" — may serve the reader better than a forced attempt to find a parallel idiom. As Baker argues, the translator's primary obligation is to the communicative purpose of the text, not to its surface form.[8]

At the same time, the paraphrase-first instinct carries its own risks. Uzbek, like all languages, has evolved an extraordinarily rich idiomatic vocabulary precisely because figurative compression is cognitively and communicatively efficient: it allows speakers to convey complex, emotionally charged meanings in compact, memorable form. A translation policy that routinely defaults to paraphrase will produce Uzbek texts that are semantically adequate but stylistically impoverished — texts that tell the reader what an expression means without showing them how it feels. This is a significant loss in literary and journalistic translation, where the affective dimension of language is inseparable from its meaning. The translator who understands conceptual blending is better positioned to avoid this trap, because the theory equips them to analyze the structural features of a blend — its input spaces, its vital relations, its generic space — and to search systematically for Uzbek expressions that recapitulate those features, even in culturally transposed form.

The growing body of empirical research on bilingual conceptual representation lends additional support to the blending-based approach. Thierry and Wu, in a widely cited study using event-related brain potentials, demonstrated that proficient bilinguals activate semantic representations in their first language even when processing in their second, suggesting that cross-linguistic conceptual mapping is not merely a theoretical construct but a neurologically real phenomenon.[9] More recent work by Degani and Tokowicz has shown that bilinguals' conceptual networks for translation-ambiguous words are significantly more interconnected and context-sensitive than those of monolinguals, a finding that has direct



implications for translation: it suggests that skilled translators are not simply switching between two parallel lexicons but navigating genuinely blended conceptual spaces. This empirical picture aligns closely with what conceptual blending theory predicts: that meaning-making is inherently integrative, and that the translation process involves the construction of complex, multi-space networks that span both the source and target languages.

For Uzbek translators working with English idioms in practical contexts — whether in literary translation, legal documentation, journalistic adaptation, or educational materials — these theoretical insights suggest a concrete set of professional practices. Rather than approaching an unfamiliar English idiom with a bilingual dictionary and a prayer, the blending-informed translator will ask a series of structured questions: What are the input spaces of this blend? What vital relations connect them? What is the emergent meaning of the blended space? Is there a Uzbek expression that activates a structurally comparable blend? If not, what is the closest available approximation, and what does it lose or gain relative to the original? These questions will not always yield clean answers, but they will produce more principled translation decisions — decisions that can be justified in terms of cognitive and communicative effect rather than mere convention or intuition. As Steen et al. have argued, a metalanguage for figurative language that is both theoretically grounded and practically usable is one of the most pressing needs in applied linguistics, and conceptual blending offers exactly this.[10]

The field of Uzbek translation studies, while growing, has not yet fully absorbed the insights of cognitive linguistics in general or conceptual blending theory in particular. Much of the existing scholarship on Uzbek translation methodology remains rooted in equivalence-based frameworks inherited from Soviet-era linguistics, which, while valuable, tend to treat meaning as a stable property of texts rather than as an emergent product of cognitive construction. Tojiboyev, in one of the few Uzbek-language studies to engage seriously with cognitive approaches, notes that Uzbek translation pedagogy has been slow to integrate theories of embodied cognition and metaphor, even as these theories have transformed translation training in Western Europe and North America.[11] This gap represents both a challenge and an opportunity: a challenge because it means that many practicing translators lack the conceptual tools to analyze blending structures systematically, and an opportunity because the introduction of these tools into Uzbek translator education could produce significant improvements in the quality and depth of translated texts.



Ultimately, what conceptual blending theory offers to the translator of English idioms into Uzbek is not a set of mechanical rules but a richer understanding of what is at stake in figurative language. It reveals that idioms are not merely decorative flourishes that can be swapped out for plainer equivalents without loss; they are the sites where a language's cognitive and cultural identity is most compactly expressed. To translate them well is to enter into a kind of creative dialogue between two cognitive worlds — to find, in the resources of the target language and culture, the blending structures that most faithfully echo those of the source, even when the surface imagery must be transformed beyond recognition. This is work that demands not just linguistic competence but cognitive empathy: the capacity to imaginatively inhabit another language's way of structuring experience, and to bring something of that experience across the barrier of linguistic difference without betraying either side. Fauconnier and Turner close their foundational work with the observation that "the full human story is a story of blending" — and for the translator of idioms, working between English and Uzbek, that observation resonates with particular and practical force.

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