
Symbolic landscapes in language: a cognitive and cultural study of hydronyms

Nuniyazova Shaxlo Ulugbekovna
nuniyazovashahlo@gmail.com

PhD student,

Tashkent State University of Uzbek Language and
Literature named after Alisher Navoi

Annotation *This article explores the cognitive and cultural aspects of hydronymy – the naming of rivers, lakes, and streams – as an essential layer of toponymy that reflects both geographic reality and the symbolic world of human communities. Traditionally, hydronyms have been treated as “linguistic fossils,” preserving archaic forms and traces of ethnic migration. Recent approaches in cognitive linguistics, however, reveal that hydronyms also embody conceptual metaphors and function as cultural texts that transmit collective memory and worldview. In this study, a comparative analysis of English and Uzbek hydronyms highlights both universal embodied schemas (rivers as paths, lakes as containers, water as life) and culture specific symbolic oppositions (for example, “white” = purity and blessing, “black” = danger and hardship), particularly strong in the Uzbek tradition. While English hydronyms predominantly emphasize descriptive features and historical stratification, Uzbek hydronyms add evaluative and symbolic dimensions rooted in ecology and nomadic traditions. The findings suggest that hydronyms represent intangible cultural heritage, linking cognition, ecology, and identity.*

Keywords *Hydronymy, cognitive linguistics, linguistic anthropology, conceptual metaphor, cultural geography, English, Uzbek*

Символические ландшафты в языке: когнитивное и культурное исследование гидронимов

Нуниязова Шахло Улугбековна
nuniyazovashahlo@gmail.com

Базовый докторант,

Ташкентский государственный университет
узбекского языка и литературы имени
Алишера Навои

Аннотация *В статье исследуются когнитивные и культурные аспекты гидронимии – имен рек, озёр и ручьёв – как особого пласта топонимики, отражающего не только географическую реальность, но и символический мир человека. Традиционно гидронимы рассматривались как «лингвистические окаменелости», сохраняющие древние языковые формы и следы этнических миграций. Современные методы, основанные на когнитивной лингвистике, выявляют, что они также представляют собой концептуальные метафоры, закрепляющие в языке коллективную память и культурные модели. В работе проведён сопоставительный анализ английских и узбекских гидронимов, что позволило выявить как универсальные схемы телесного опыта (река как путь, озеро как контейнер, вода как жизнь), так и специфические символические оппозиции (например, «белое» – чистота, благословение; «чёрное» – опасность, трудность), характерные для узбекской традиции. Показано, что английские гидронимы в первую очередь*

фиксируют описательные признаки и историческую многослойность, тогда как узбекские придают воде культурно-оценочную функцию. Автор приходит к выводу, что гидронимы функционируют как элементы нематериального культурного наследия, где язык, культура и экология переплетаются в едином когнитивном пространстве.

Ключевые слова Гидронимия, когнитивная лингвистика, концептуальная метафора, английский язык, узбекский язык, символические оппозиции; топонимика, культурная география

Tilda ramziy manzaralar: gidronimlarning kognitiv va madaniy tadqiqi

Nuniyazova Shaxlo Ulug'bekovna

nuniyazovashahlo@gmail.com

PhD doktorant,

Alisher Navoiy nomidagi Toshkent Davlat

O'zbek tili va adabiyoti universiteti

Annotatsiya Ushbu maqolada gidronimika – daryo, ko'l va irmoqlarga nom berish jarayoni – toponimikaning muhim qatlami sifatida tahlil qilinadi. Gidronimlar nafaqat geografik haqiqatni, balki inson jamoalarining ramziy olamini ham aks ettiradi. An'anaviy qarashlarda gidronimlar "tiliy qoldiqlar" sifatida, qadimiy shakllarni va etnik migratsiya izlarini saqlab qoluvchi birliklar deb baholangan. Kognitiv lingvistikaning zamonaviy yondashuvlari esa gidronimlar konseptual metaforalarni mujassamlashtirishi hamda kollektiv xotira va dunyoqarashni uzatadigan madaniy matnlar sifatida faoliyat yuritishini ko'rsatmoqda. Ushbu tadqiqotda ingliz va o'zbek gidronimlari qiyosiy tahlil qilinib, umumiy mujassamlangan sxemalar (masalan, daryolar = yo'l, ko'llar = idish, suv = hayot) bilan bir qatorda madaniyatga xos ramziy oppozitsiyalar ham yoritilgan. Xususan, o'zbek an'anasida "oq" = poklik va baraka, "qora" = xavf va qiyinchilik mazmunlari kuchli namoyon bo'ladi. Ingliz gidronimlari asosan tavsifiy xususiyatlar va tarixiy qatlamlarga urg'u berar ekan, o'zbek gidronimlari ekologiya va ko'chmanchi an'analarga tayanib, baholovchi va ramziy o'lchamlarni ham qo'shadi. Tadqiqot natijalari shuni ko'rsatadiki, gidronimlar nomoddiy madaniy merosning bir ko'rinishi bo'lib, ular kognitsiya, ekologiya va identiklikni bog'lovchi vosita sifatida xizmat qiladi.

Kalit so'zlar Gidronimika, kognitiv lingvistika, lingvistik antropologiya, konseptual metafora, madaniy geografiya, ingliz tili, o'zbek tili

Introduction

The study of place names (toponymy) remains one of the most fruitful intersections of linguistics, geography, and cultural studies. Among its many branches, hydronymy – the naming of rivers, lakes, and streams – has historically drawn attention for its antiquity and

persistence. Water naming traditions often constitute some of the earliest strata of linguistic evidence, predating written history and reflecting long-lasting cultural perceptions (Ekwall, 1960; Tent & Blair, 2011).

Traditional research has generally treated hydronyms as linguistic fossils, valuable for

tracing historical migrations and language contact. Yet, modern approaches rooted in cognitive linguistics and linguistic anthropology reposition hydronyms as cultural artifacts: they not only reflect physical landscapes but also encode conceptual metaphors and symbolic values. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) famously proposed, metaphor is not a matter of poetic embellishment but a structure of thought. Place names, then, provide an archive of how communities understand and imagine their environments.

By doing so, it sheds light on the tension between universal embodied schemas (e.g., rivers as “paths,” lakes as “containers”) and cultural specificity (e.g., symbolic opposition of white/black in Turkic hydronymy). Unlike earlier studies that restricted themselves to etymological cataloguing, the present work treats hydronyms as semiotic expressions of environmental worldview, cultural identity, and collective memory.

Research on hydronyms spans several traditions. In English studies, Ekwall’s Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names (1960) and Watt’s Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names (2004) remain foundational. These works highlight the layering of Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Norman elements, showing how hydronyms preserve evidence of colonization, conquest, and migration. Hough (2016) has emphasized that hydronyms in Britain often reflect a deep historical palimpsest, rather than simply contemporary descriptive naming. Research demonstrates that names of rivers and lakes often serve as cultural texts encoding myths, rituals, and moral values (Basso, 1996). In many societies, hydronyms function as markers of sacred geography, embodying notions of purity, danger, fertility, or ancestral presence. For instance, the symbolic opposition between “white” and “black” hydronyms has been documented in numerous traditions, where “white” denotes blessing or purity while “black” signals danger or hardship (Toporov, 1995). This symbolic layering suggests that

hydronyms are not simply referential labels but active elements in the cultural construction of space.

Comparative studies have shown important cross-cultural differences in hydronymic patterns. English hydronyms, shaped by Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, and Norse substrata, tend to foreground descriptive and geographical attributes – size, flow, or physical appearance – while retaining traces of historical linguistic layering (Mills, 2011). By contrast, research on Central Asian hydronyms, including Uzbek traditions, reveals a stronger evaluative and symbolic dimension. Here, hydronyms frequently encode ecological values, nomadic heritage, and moral associations, making them both geographical indicators and cultural signifiers (Sagdullaev, 2007). These findings align with broader discussions in cultural geography, where place names are understood as inscriptions of human-environment relations and collective memory (Cosgrove, 1998).

In Central Asian studies, hydronymy was historically treated as part of ethnographic classification (Karimov, 1987), where early Soviet onomasts categorized names according to semantic groups (color terms, fauna, flora, etc.). More recent scholars, such as Muminov (2020), have approached Uzbek hydronyms from the perspective of linguistic anthropology and cognitive linguistics, stressing symbolic color oppositions and ecological adaptations.

The cognitive linguistic turn (Lakoff, 1987; Langacker, 1987) reframes hydronyms as instantiations of conceptual schemas. For example:

- *Container schemas* → lakes as bounded entities (Long Lake, Kattako’l).
- *Source-Path-Goal schemas* → rivers as dynamic trajectories of life (Avon, Zarafshon “Gold-Spreader”).
- *Metaphors of purity/danger* → symbolic color terms (Oqsoy “White Stream,” Qorasuv “Black Water”).

Finally, Tent & Blair (2011) propose a typology of naming motivations that range

from descriptive geography to commemoration, symbolism, and metaphor. This typology is useful across languages, revealing convergences (shared descriptive rationale) and divergences (cultural symbolism).

Methodology

This article employs a corpus-driven comparative approach, integrating descriptive, semantic, and cognitive analysis:

Data Selection:

- English data drawn from documented hydronyms in dictionaries (Ekwall, 1960; Watts, 2004).
- Uzbek data taken from contemporary maps and scholarly works (Muminov, 2020).

Approximately 200 hydronyms (100 English, 100 Uzbek) were selected for transparency of meaning.

Categorization:

Names were grouped into semantic categories:

1. Descriptive (size, depth, clarity).
2. Color terms.
3. Sensory/qualitative (salty, bitter, fertile).
4. Symbolic associations.

Analytical Tools:

- Cognitive schemas (Lakoff, 1987; Langacker, 1987).
- Conceptual metaphors (Water is Life, Water is Wealth).
- Cross-cultural symbolic interpretations (Kövecses, 2010).

Comparative Focus:

After categorization, English and Uzbek naming strategies were statistically compared to highlight tendencies toward literal vs. symbolic encoding.

Results

1. *Descriptive Attributes*

Both traditions rely heavily on perceptual description. Clearwater River, Long Lake (English) and Chuqursoy "Deep Stream," Kattako'l "Big Lake" (Uzbek) demonstrate embodied perception as the simplest naming strategy. However, English remains firmly

descriptive, while Uzbek often layers evaluation (deep → dangerous, powerful).

2. *Color Terms and Symbolism*

- English: Blackwater, White Lake describe visible qualities.
- Uzbek: Oqsoy (white = purity, sacred), Qorasuv (black = hardship, danger).

This highlights cultural layering: English prioritizes perceptual realism; Uzbek employs symbolic oppositions tied to nomadic traditions and Islamic cosmology (Muminov, 2020).

3. *Movement and Flow Metaphors*

Both languages conceptualize rivers through the Source-Path-Goal schema. English Avon (from Celtic "river") serves as an archetype, while Uzbek Zarafshon "gold-spreader" encodes the metaphor Water is Wealth. This divergence illustrates universal schemas with culturally particular mapping.

4. *Ecological Attributes*

Hydronyms such as Sho'rko'l "Salty Lake" (Uzbek) or Salt Creek (English) reflect environmental properties. Yet, while English tends to remain literal, Uzbek often associates salinity or bitterness with fertility vs. barrenness metaphors, extending meaning into social-ecological evaluations.

Discussion

The comparative perspective underscores several key insights:

1. *Embodied Universals:* Communities universally rely on perceptual descriptors for naming. These exemplify what Lakoff (1987) calls "basic-level categorization," grounded in human experience.
2. *Cultural Symbolism:* Uzbek hydronymy develops symbolic layers absent in English. The oq vs. qora dichotomy reflects a worldview where water is simultaneously life-giving and potentially dangerous. English, by comparison, maintains pragmatic description with occasional archaism.
3. *Historical Layers:* English hydronyms preserve traces of successive linguistic conquests (Ekwall, 1960; Watts, 2004).

Uzbek hydronyms encode ecological strategies of survival in semi-arid environments, embedding water with cultural connotations of fertility and danger.

4. *Hydronyms as Heritage*: Both traditions illustrate how naming conserves collective memory. They function as intangible cultural heritage, preserving invisible connections between environment, cognition, and social history.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that hydronyms transcend geography – they represent a

dialogue between human cognition and cultural worldview. English hydronymy exemplifies historical stratification and descriptive realism, while Uzbek hydronymy illustrates ecological symbolism and cultural encoding.

By reshaping hydronyms within a cognitive linguistic framework, this paper emphasizes their role not only in environmental description, but also as cultural texts. Hydronyms encapsulate ecological adaptation, moral symbolism, and collective heritage. Recognizing them as such expands the field of onomastics into broader cultural geography and memory studies.

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