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THE CATEGORY OF NUMBER IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK PROVERBS: A COMPARATIVE EXAMINATION OF FIGURATIVE, SOCIAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL MEANINGS

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Abstract. This article conducts a comparative analysis of the category of number in English and Uzbek proverbs, focusing on its figurative, social, and philosophical dimensions. Drawing on paremiological corpora, the study examines how numerical expressions (e.g., “one,” “two,” “seven,” “forty,” “thousand”) encode cultural worldviews. In English proverbs, numbers often reflect individualistic pragmatism and binary oppositions (e.g., “Two heads are better than one”). In Uzbek proverbs (maqollar), they emphasize communal harmony, endurance, and symbolic multiplicity (e.g., Yetti o‘lchab bir kes – “Measure seven times, cut once”; Qirq yildan keyin ham chiqadi – truth emerges after forty years). Qualitative methods reveal universal cognitive patterns alongside language-specific cultural encodings.

Keywords: paremiology, category of number, proverbs, comparative linguistics, figurative language, cultural semantics, English-Uzbek contrastive analysis, cognitive paremiology.

Ingliz va o‘zbek maqollarida son kategoriyasi: ko‘chma, ijtimoiy va falsafiy ma’nolarning qiyosiy tahlili

Annotatsiya. Ushbu maqolada ingliz va o‘zbek maqollaridagi son kategoriyasining majoziy, ijtimoiy va falsafiy ma’nolari qiyosiy tahlil qilinadi. Paremiologik korpuslarga asoslanib, raqamli ifodalar (masalan, “bir”, “ikki”, “yetti”, “qirq”, “ming”) madaniy dunyoqarashlarni qanday kodlashtirishini o‘rganadi. Ingliz maqollarida sonlar ko‘pincha individualizm va ikkilik qarama-qarshiliklarini aks ettiradi (masalan, “Two heads are better than one”). O‘zbek maqollarida esa jamoaviy hamjihatlik, chidamlilik va ramziy ko‘plikni ta’kidlaydi (masalan, Yetti o‘lchab bir kes; Qirq yildan keyin ham chiqadi).

Kalit so‘zlar: paremiologiya, son kategoriyasi, maqollar, qiyosiy tilshunoslik, obrazli til, madaniy semantika, ingliz-o‘zbek kontrastiv tahlili, kognitiv paremiologiya.

Категория числа в английских и узбекских пословицах: сравнительный анализ образных, социальных и философских значений

Аннотация. В данной статье проводится сравнительный анализ категории числа в английских и узбекских пословицах с акцентом на их фигуративные, социальные и философские значения. На основе паремиологических корпусов изучается, как числовые выражения (например, “один”, “два”, “семь”, “сорок”, “тысяча”) кодируют культурные мировоззрения. В английских пословицах числа часто отражают индивидуалистический прагматизм и бинарные оппозиции (например, “Two heads are better than one”). В узбекских пословицах (maqollar) подчеркиваются коллективная гармония, выносливость и

символическая множественность (например, Yetti o‘lchab bir kes – «Семь раз отмерь, один отрежь»; *Qirq* yildan keyin ham chiqadi – истина выходит спустя сорок лет).

Ключевые слова: паремиология, категория числа, пословицы, сравнительное языкознание, образный язык, культурная семантика, англо-узбекский контрастивный анализ, когнитивная паремиология.

Introduction. English, an analytic Indo-European language, and Uzbek, an agglutinative Turkic language, present a particularly fertile ground for typological and cultural comparison. Linguistically, English relies heavily on word order, auxiliary verbs, and limited inflectional morphology, whereas Uzbek employs extensive suffixation to express grammatical relations, tense, modality, and possession. This structural divergence extends beyond grammar into discourse traditions, including proverbial language. Proverbs, as condensed carriers of cultural memory and social wisdom, often preserve older linguistic patterns and encode cultural values through symbolic and metaphorical expressions. Within this framework, numerical elements in proverbs function not merely as quantitative indicators but as culturally loaded semiotic markers that reflect worldview, cognition, and collective experience.

English proverbs frequently employ small integers—such as one, two, three, and nine—to express pragmatic reasoning, individual agency, and cause-effect logic. Expressions such as “A stitch in time saves nine,” “Two heads are better than one,” and “Three may keep a secret, if two of them are dead” illustrate the functional role of numbers in emphasizing efficiency, caution, and rational decision-making. These numerical constructions often reflect Enlightenment-era values emphasizing individual responsibility, empirical reasoning, and utilitarian practicality. As Wolfgang Mieder observes, proverbs in European traditions often “compress practical wisdom into memorable formulas shaped by logic and experience” [4].

In English paremiology, numbers thus tend to reinforce measurable outcomes and personal initiative, aligning with broader Western philosophical traditions emphasizing rationalism and individualism. In contrast, Uzbek maqollar—deeply rooted in Islamic philosophy, nomadic heritage, and Silk Road intercultural exchange—frequently utilize symbolic and culturally significant numbers such as seven (yetti), forty (qirq), and thousand (ming). These numbers carry metaphorical and spiritual meanings that extend beyond literal quantification. For example, seven often symbolizes sacred completeness and divine order, reflecting Islamic cosmology and Turkic mythological traditions. Similarly, forty is widely associated with endurance, transformation, and ritual significance, appearing in expressions related to mourning, patience, and maturity. The number thousand, meanwhile, commonly denotes abundance, exaggeration, and collective prosperity. As Alimova and Rasulov argue, numerical symbolism in Uzbek proverbs often underscores collectivist values, communal responsibility, and philosophical acceptance of fate (Alimova and Rasulov 2026). Proverbs such as “Yetti o‘lchab, bir kes” (Measure seven times, cut once) and “Qirq yil qirg‘in bo‘lsa ham, ajali yetgan o‘lar” illustrate how numbers reinforce caution, destiny, and endurance within Uzbek cultural cognition[10].

Methods. A qualitative comparative methodology was employed in this study, grounded in the principles of contrastive paremiology and cross-cultural linguistic analysis. Contrastive paremiology, as developed in the works of J. Buranov and later expanded by U. Yusupov, provides a framework for examining similarities and differences in proverbial systems across languages and cultures. This approach allows researchers to identify not only structural parallels but also deeper semantic, cultural, and philosophical divergences embedded within proverbial discourse [5].

By applying this methodology, the present study examines how numerical elements function as culturally encoded symbols in English and Uzbek proverbs, highlighting both universal patterns and culturally specific meanings.Selection criteria were established to ensure consistency and analytical clarity. Proverbs were included if they contained explicit cardinal or ordinal numbers, such as “one,” “two,” “seven,” or their Uzbek equivalents “bir,” “ikki,” “yetti,” and “qirq.” Additionally, quantifiers

functioning numerically—such as “hundred,” “thousand,” or metaphorical equivalents—were included when they clearly performed a numerical-symbolic function. This criterion ensured that all selected items reflected numerical cognition rather than purely lexical coincidence.

Through this qualitative comparative methodology, the study aims to provide a comprehensive examination of numerical symbolism in English and Uzbek proverbs, highlighting how linguistic structures, cultural traditions, and philosophical perspectives converge in the use of numbers as cognitive and cultural anchors.

Results. Numerical proverbs in English and Uzbek cluster around key integers, revealing patterned symbolic functions that reflect cognitive, cultural, and philosophical orientations. As paremiologists have noted, numbers in proverbial discourse rarely serve purely quantitative roles; instead, they function as symbolic anchors that compress cultural knowledge into memorable linguistic forms. In comparative perspective, English numerical proverbs tend to emphasize pragmatic reasoning and individual agency, while Uzbek maqollar often employ numbers as culturally embedded symbols reflecting collectivism, endurance, and spiritual worldview[11].

The Number One (Bir / One): Singularity, Individuality, and Universality

The number one in both English and Uzbek proverbs frequently symbolizes unity, individuality, and existential uniqueness. In English, proverbs such as “One man’s trash is another man’s treasure” illustrate subjective valuation and individual perception. Similarly, “Look out for number one” reflects a cultural emphasis on self-interest and personal responsibility, aligning with Western individualistic values. As Wolfgang Mieder observes, English proverbs often foreground “personal initiative and pragmatic individualism” [8].

Philosophically, the number one in English proverbs reinforces autonomy, independence, and self-reliance.Uzbek maqollar, while also using “bir” to indicate singularity, often embed this number within collectivist and philosophical frameworks. For instance, “Bir ko‘zlilar eliga borsang, bir ko‘zingni qisib yur” (“In the land of the one-eyed, narrow one eye”) emphasizes adaptation to social norms and cultural conformity. Another proverb, “Yangilik yaratar bir kishi, bahramand bo‘lar har kishi” (“One creates innovation, all benefit”), reflects collectivist values, where individual achievement ultimately benefits the community. Furthermore, “Bir boshga bir o‘lim” (“One death per head”) expresses existential inevitability, highlighting philosophical reflections on mortality and human equality. This aligns with broader cultural patterns in Uzbek proverbial traditions, where singularity often transitions into universality and communal meaning [7].

Duality (Two / Ikki): Balance, Cooperation, and Conflict.

The number two frequently symbolizes duality, cooperation, or opposition. English proverbs such as “Two heads are better than one” emphasize collaboration and shared problem-solving, reflecting pragmatic teamwork. Conversely, “Two‘s company, three’s a crowd” establishes social boundaries, suggesting that dual relationships are optimal for intimacy and cooperation. These expressions reflect a balance between cooperation and individual boundaries, characteristic of English pragmatic reasoning.

Uzbek proverbs involving “ikki” often emphasize caution and potential conflict arising from divided intentions. For example, “Ikki quyonni quvlagan birini ham tutolmas” (“He who chases two hares catches neither”) highlights the risks of divided focus and inefficiency. Another proverb, “Ikki qo‘chqor kallasi bir qozonda qaynamas” (“Two rams’ heads do not boil in one pot”), reflects irreconcilable conflict and competing authority. Socially, these proverbs warn against divided loyalties and competing leadership.

Three and Small Multiples: Pragmatic Finality and Social Diffusion.

The number three appears in both English and Uzbek proverbs as a marker of completeness, emphasis, or pragmatic finality. In English, “Three strikes and you’re out” conveys finality and consequence after repeated attempts. The number three here functions as a threshold of tolerance and decision-making.

Uzbek proverbs using “uch” often emphasize social diffusion and foresight. For example, “Uch kishi bilgan sirni yuz kishi bilar” (“A secret known to three becomes known to a hundred”)

illustrates the rapid spread of information within communal societies. Another example, “Uch kun barvaqt turgan bir kun yutar” (“Rising early for three days wins one day”), highlights foresight, discipline, and philosophical reflection on time management. These examples demonstrate how small multiples function as symbolic thresholds in both traditions, though Uzbek usage often emphasizes communal dynamics.

Seven (Yetti): Sacred Completeness and Cultural Symbolism.

The number seven holds significant symbolic meaning, particularly in Uzbek proverbs. In English, numerical symbolism involving seven is less prominent but still present in expressions such as “At sixes and sevens,” which denotes confusion and disorder. While not explicitly symbolic in a sacred sense, such expressions demonstrate the mnemonic value of numerical phrasing.

In Uzbek tradition, however, “yetti” carries deep cultural and spiritual significance. The proverb “Yetti o‘lchab bir kes” (“Measure seven times, cut once”) emphasizes caution and precision, intensifying similar English expressions such as “measure thrice.” Another example, “Yetti yoshga yetguncha yer to‘qmog‘in yersan” (“Until seven, you endure the earth’s blows”), reflects philosophical interpretations of childhood, growth, and life’s trials. The number seven often symbolizes completeness and ritual perfection in Turkic-Islamic cultural traditions, reflecting cosmological and spiritual beliefs [8].

Forty (Qirq): Endurance, Ritual, and Transformation.

The prominence of forty in Uzbek tradition is linked to Islamic and nomadic cultural practices, including forty-day mourning periods and transitional rituals. Such symbolic use of forty reinforces endurance, patience, and spiritual transformation within Uzbek cultural cognition[7].

Higher Quantities (Hundred, Thousand / Yuz, Ming): Abundance and Hyperbole

Higher numerical values such as hundred and thousand frequently function as hyperbolic markers in both English and Uzbek proverbs. English expressions such as “A picture is worth a thousand words” and “One in a million” emphasize exaggeration and rarity. These proverbs use large numbers to intensify meaning and rhetorical impact.

Similarly, Uzbek maqollar employ “yuz” and “ming” to denote abundance and magnitude. For instance, “Bilimli mingni yiqar” (“The knowledgeable defeats a thousand”) emphasizes intellectual superiority over numerical strength. Another example, “Ming marta eshitgandan bir marta ko‘rgan yaxshi” (“Better to see once than hear a thousand times”) reflects philosophical empiricism and experiential knowledge. Such proverbs highlight the contrast between singular experience (“bir”) and vast multiplicity (“ming”), reinforcing cognitive and philosophical dichotomies.

Frequency Patterns and Cultural Implications

Conceptually, frequency patterns reveal significant cultural differences. Uzbek proverbs favor symbolic numbers such as seven, forty, and thousand, reflecting spiritual, ritual, and collectivist orientations. English proverbs, by contrast, favor smaller, practical numbers such as one, two, nine, and ten, reflecting pragmatic reasoning and individualistic values. As Archer Taylor notes, numerical symbolism in proverbs often reflects “culturally shaped preferences rather than universal frequency” [8].

Overall, the clustering of numerical proverbs around key integers demonstrates how numbers function as cognitive anchors for cultural identity. English numerical proverbs emphasize practicality, individualism, and rational decision-making, while Uzbek maqollar foreground collectivism, endurance, and symbolic worldview. Through this comparative lens, numerical symbolism emerges as a powerful indicator of cultural cognition and philosophical orientation embedded within proverbial language.

Discussion. Figurative Meanings: Numbers as Cognitive and Metaphorical Devices. In both English and Uzbek proverb traditions, numbers function not merely as quantitative markers but as figurative devices that encode metaphorical meanings. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, numerical expressions operate as conceptual metaphors, where quantity maps onto abstract qualities such as effort, value, patience, or inevitability. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue, human

cognition frequently structures abstract thought through metaphorical mappings, including numerical metaphors that translate measurable quantities into qualitative judgments [2].

In English proverbs, numbers are often employed metonymically to emphasize efficiency and practicality. For example, in the proverb “A stitch in time saves nine,” the number nine functions as a symbolic quantifier representing minimal effort yielding maximal benefit. The emphasis lies not on the literal number but on the pragmatic logic of preventative action. Similarly, expressions such as “One step at a time” or “Two heads are better than one” utilize small integers to communicate logical progression and cooperative reasoning. This pattern reflects English analytic linguistic structure, where brevity and precision shape figurative meaning.

By contrast, Uzbek maqollar frequently employ hyperbole and synecdoche, using numbers to exaggerate or symbolize broader conceptual meanings. The number “ming” (thousand), for example, often represents infinity or immeasurable magnitude rather than literal quantity, as in “Ming marta eshitgandan bir marta ko‘rgan yaxshi.” Likewise, “qirq” (forty) frequently symbolizes longevity, endurance, or transformation, rather than a precise numerical value. This symbolic elasticity reflects Uzbek agglutinative linguistic rhythm and oral storytelling traditions, which favor expressive elaboration and cultural symbolism.

Despite these differences, universal patterns emerge. Small numbers—such as one and two—often.

Uzbek numerical proverbs, by contrast, frequently reflect collectivist values rooted in nomadic heritage, agrarian cooperation, and Islamic moral traditions. For example, proverbs emphasizing “bir” (one) often highlight unity rather than individuality. Expressions emphasizing “birdamlik” (unity) suggest harmony derived from collective action. Conversely, “ikki” (two) often represents disruption or division, as in “Ikki qo‘chqor kallasi bir qozonda qaynamas,” which warns against competing authority. Similarly, “Ikki quyonni quvlagan birini ham tutolmas” promotes focus and social responsibility, discouraging divided loyalty.

Numbers such as “qirq” also reinforce social values such as loyalty and gratitude. The proverb “Bir kun tuz ichgan joyingga qirq kun salom ber” reflects long-term social obligation and communal relationships. These examples illustrate how numerical proverbs function as socializing mechanisms, transmitting cultural expectations and moral behavior across generations. As J. Buranov notes, contrastive paremiology reveals how proverbs mirror social organization and cultural priorities [9]

These patterns also reflect historical influences. Uzbek proverb traditions developed within nomadic and clan-based societies emphasizing solidarity and mutual support. English proverbs, shaped by mercantile and industrial contexts, often emphasize efficiency, independence, and pragmatic cooperation. Thus, numerical symbolism becomes a linguistic reflection of broader sociocultural structures.

Philosophical Meanings: Numerical Proverbs and Worldview.

Beyond figurative and social meanings, numerical proverbs also convey philosophical perspectives on existence, time, and human experience. The number one frequently symbolizes uniqueness, individuality, and existential solitude. Proverbs such as “One death per head” emphasize universal mortality and philosophical equality. This existential dimension resonates with broader philosophical traditions exploring individuality and human condition.

The number two often represents dialectical tension, echoing philosophical traditions dating back to Heraclitus, who emphasized unity emerging from opposites. Proverbs involving two often depict cooperation or conflict, reflecting dualistic thinking embedded in human cognition.

Numbers such as seven and forty carry deeper cosmological meanings in Uzbek culture. Seven frequently symbolizes completeness, perfection, or sacred order, reflecting Islamic and Turkic traditions. Forty often represents transformation, endurance, and ritual cycles, such as mourning periods or spiritual preparation. These numerical patterns reflect cyclical conceptions of time and divine order. In contrast, English numerical proverbs more commonly reflect linear progression, emphasizing efficiency and forward movement.

The proverb “Yetti o‘lchab bir kes” exemplifies philosophical deliberation, advocating careful planning over impulsive action. While similar concepts exist in English (“measure twice, cut once”), the Uzbek version intensifies meaning through sacred numerology, illustrating cultural amplification of universal wisdom.

Overall, numbers in proverbs universalize human concerns—unity, conflict, patience, and experience—while simultaneously reflecting culturally specific ontologies. As Wolfgang Mieder emphasizes, proverbs serve as “miniature philosophies” that encode collective wisdom through linguistic form [5].

Comparative Typology and Translation Implications.

Comparative typology further supports these observations. According to J. Buranov, English proverbial structure tends toward analytic precision, whereas Uzbek proverbs demonstrate synthetic symbolism and morphological richness [2] These typological differences create translation challenges. Numbers such as “qirq” often lack direct equivalents in English, as their symbolic meaning extends beyond numerical value. Translators therefore rely on approximate equivalents, such as substituting “seven” or generalizing the meaning while preserving cultural wisdom.

These findings have practical implications for language pedagogy, intercultural communication, and computational linguistics. Teaching numerical proverbs enhances cultural competence in second-language learning, while machine translation systems must account for symbolic numerical semantics rather than literal interpretation. Understanding numerical symbolism also facilitates intercultural dialogue by revealing shared human values embedded within linguistic diversity.

Limitations and Future Research.

Despite its findings, this study has limitations. The corpus size remains limited, and oral variations of proverbs may not be fully represented. Future research could expand digital corpora and incorporate psycholinguistic experiments examining how speakers interpret numerical symbolism. Such interdisciplinary approaches would further illuminate the cognitive and cultural functions of numbers in proverbial discourse.

In conclusion, numerical proverbs function as cognitive anchors, social guides, and philosophical reflections. While universal patterns emerge across languages, English and Uzbek traditions demonstrate distinct cultural interpretations shaped by linguistic typology, historical experience, and worldview.

Conclusion. The category of number in English and Uzbek proverbs extends far beyond grammatical function, emerging as a multidimensional linguistic phenomenon that embodies figurative vividness, social cohesion, and philosophical depth. In proverbial discourse, numbers operate as symbolic tools that structure cultural meaning, compress social norms, and encode collective experience. As noted by Archer Taylor, proverbs represent “traditional wisdom condensed into memorable form,” and numerical elements enhance this memorability while simultaneously conveying culturally specific interpretations [11].

Thus, numbers in proverbs function not only as lexical components but also as cognitive anchors shaping cultural identity and worldview. The comparative analysis demonstrates that English numerical proverbs tend to emphasize pragmatic duality, rational decision-making, and individual agency. Small integers such as one, two, and three frequently dominate English proverbial discourse, reflecting analytic linguistic structure and Enlightenment-influenced philosophical traditions. These proverbs often promote efficiency, independence, and logical reasoning. As Wolfgang Mieder argues, Western proverbs frequently encode “practical experience and individual responsibility,” highlighting personal initiative and measurable outcomes [1].

Consequently, numbers in English proverbs often reinforce utilitarian thinking and linear progress, aligning with broader cultural values of individualism and pragmatism.In contrast, Uzbek numerical proverbs emphasize symbolic multiplicity, communal endurance, and spiritual reflection. Numbers such as seven (yetti), forty (qirq), and thousand (ming) carry culturally embedded meanings rooted in Islamic traditions, nomadic heritage, and Silk Road intercultural exchange. These symbolic

numbers often represent completeness, transformation, abundance, and collective resilience. As J. Buranov notes in contrastive paremiology, proverb systems reflect the social and cultural structures of their communities, with Uzbek proverbs often foregrounding collectivist values and communal harmony [1].

Future research may extend this comparative framework to other Turkic and Indo-European languages, such as Kazakh, Turkish, Russian, or German, to further explore cross-cultural numerical symbolism. Expanding digital corpora and employing interdisciplinary approaches—including cognitive linguistics, anthropology, and computational analysis—would deepen understanding of numerical semantics in proverb traditions. Additionally, psycholinguistic studies could investigate how speakers interpret symbolic numbers across cultural contexts.

Ultimately, preserving and comparing numerical proverbs contributes to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage while promoting global understanding. These numerical gems, embedded within traditional wisdom, connect linguistic worlds and reveal shared human concerns—unity, patience, cooperation, and resilience. By examining how numbers function within English and Uzbek proverbs, this study underscores the profound role of language in shaping cultural cognition and highlights the enduring relevance of proverbs in contemporary intercultural discourse.

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