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PHRASEOLOGY AND PROVERBS AS VEHICLES OF SARCASM IN UZBEK AND ENGLISH

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Abstract. Sarcasm rarely relies on language built from scratch; speakers commonly reach for ready-made, culturally saturated expressions. This article offers a contrastive linguacultural and pragmatic analysis of how phraseological units (idioms and set phrases) and proverbs function as vehicles of sarcasm in Uzbek and English. Drawing on a comparable corpus that leans on literary sources together with phraseological and proverb dictionaries, it examines each token on two layers its conventional, dictionary-attested meaning and its sarcastic deployment in context. The analysis shows that both languages exploit the inherently echoic character of fixed expressions, re-voicing a unit whose conventional meaning is publicly known in order to signal dissociation from it. The two traditions diverge, however, in their materials and staging. Uzbek literary sarcasm characteristically embeds genuine folk proverbs and idioms in characters' speech, turning their communal authority against a social target, with imagery drawn from agrarian and folk life. English more often coins a mock-proverbial maxim or twists an existing proverb (the anti-proverb) in the narratorial voice, foregrounding individual irony. The same echoic mechanism is thus realised through culturally specific resources, each tradition recruiting the fixed expressions most central to its own culture. The findings extend the echoic account of irony from single utterances to phraseology and paremiology and add under-described Uzbek data to the field.

Keywords: sarcasm; verbal irony; phraseology; proverbs; paremiology; echoic mention; anti-proverb; contrastive pragmatics; Uzbek; English; linguoculturology.

Introduction. Sarcasm is an evaluative and deeply culture-bound speech act, and speakers rarely construct it from scratch. More often they reach for ready-made language the fixed, conventionalized expressions a community has already invested with meaning. Among these, phraseological units (idioms, set phrases, and fixed collocations) and proverbs are the most culturally saturated and evaluation-laden resources a language offers: they condense shared values, imagery, and moral judgements into stable, recognizable form. This pre-packaged evaluative charge is precisely what makes them such effective vehicles for sarcasm, in which a positive or authoritative form is voiced in order to convey a critical, dissociative meaning. Comparing how two languages recruit their fixed expressions for sarcastic ends therefore exposes not only differing rhetorical habits but also the cultural values each community draws upon when it mocks, criticizes, or undercuts.

Pragmatic theory clarifies why fixed expressions are so well suited to this role. On the Gricean account (Grice, 1975), sarcasm flouts the maxim of Quality, prompting the hearer to derive an intended meaning opposed to what is literally said; on the relevance-theoretic account (Sperber & Wilson, 1981; Wilson & Sperber, 2012), it is echoic, re-voicing an attributed thought while signalling

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rejection of it. Proverbs are echoic almost by definition: to utter a proverb is to quote the collective voice of tradition, so deploying one with a dissociative attitude yields a ready-made echoic sarcasm. Idioms, for their part, carry a fixed evaluative colouring that a speaker can invert or set against an incongruent context. The phraseological tradition (Vinogradov, 1947; Kunin, 1986; Telia, 1996), and for Uzbek the foundational work of Rahmatullaev, together with paremiology (Mieder, 2004), has described these units and their cultural connotations in detail, while linguoculturology (Vorobyov, 1997; Maslova, 2001) has shown how such fixed expressions encode a community's worldview.

These bodies of work, however, have developed largely in parallel. Pragmatics explains the mechanism of sarcasm but says little about the fixed expressions that carry it; phraseology and paremiology describe the units and their connotations but seldom analyse their sarcastic deployment; and linguoculturology establishes the cultural embedding of idioms and proverbs without tracing how that embedding is exploited for mockery. The intersection how phraseological units and proverbs specifically function as vehicles of sarcasm remains thinly examined, and a contrastive Uzbek-English account is effectively absent. The gap is consequential: Uzbek possesses an exceptionally rich stock of proverbs and idioms shaped by folk, agrarian, and Islamic imagery, whereas English draws on a different cultural and literary inheritance, so a comparison promises to reveal both shared pragmatic mechanisms and sharply divergent cultural raw material.

The present article addresses this gap through a combined lingucultural and pragmatic analysis. Its aim is to identify how fixed expressions are recruited for sarcasm in the two languages and to interpret the resulting patterns in both pragmatic and cultural terms.

Materials and Methods. The study adopts a qualitative, contrastive, descriptive–interpretive design that pairs pragmatic analysis with linguocultural interpretation. The two datasets are treated as comparable corpora rather than a translated parallel corpus, since translation would re-route the culture-specific imagery of idioms and proverbs through the target language and erase the contrast under examination. Because sarcasm built on a fixed expression works by subverting a conventional meaning, each token is analysed on two layers: (a) the conventional, dictionary-attested meaning, evaluative charge, and cultural connotation of the expression, and (b) its sarcastic deployment in a specific context.

Two complementary sources are used for each language. The first is a reference inventory phraseological and proverb dictionaries that establish each unit's conventional meaning and cultural imagery. For Uzbek, this comprises Rahmatullaev's phraseological dictionary together with standard collections of folk proverbs (O‘zbek xalq maqollari); for English, standard idiom dictionaries (e.g., Oxford, Cambridge) and proverb collections (the Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs; Mieder, 2004). The second is a usage corpus of contextual sarcastic tokens drawn from two registers in which fixed expressions are deployed sarcastically: dialogue in twentieth- and twenty-first-century prose and drama, and informal digital communication (public social-media and messaging exchanges). The target sample is approximately 80–100 sarcastic tokens per language (phraseological and proverbial combined), balanced across the two registers. All digital examples were taken from publicly accessible posts, with usernames and other identifying details removed and wording reported solely for linguistic analysis, in line with standard ethical guidance on the use of public user-generated content. (The author should specify the exact dictionary editions and literary sources consulted, and the precise digital-collection dates.)

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Each token was annotated on four levels. Form: the phraseological type (following Vinogradov's typology of fusions, unities, and combinations, and Kunin for English) or the proverb, together with its conventional meaning and evaluative charge from the reference dictionary. Sarcastic mechanism: whether the sarcasm arises from echoic deployment (re-voicing received wisdom while dissociating from it), inversion of the unit's evaluative charge, or clash with context (Grice, 1975; Sperber & Wilson, 1981). Lingucultural layer: the cultural value, domain, or image the expression draws on (Telia, 1996; Maslova, 2001) for example, religion, agriculture, kinship, or hospitality. Pragmatic function: the speech act performed (criticism, reproach, dismissal) and its politeness status as an off-record face-threatening act (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Tokens were then grouped into a typology for each language and contrasted along three dimensions: which phraseological and proverbial types are recruited, which sarcastic mechanisms dominate, and which cultural domains supply the imagery.

Results. Across both literary traditions, fixed expressions serve sarcasm chiefly through echoic deployment re-voicing communal wisdom or a conventional idiom while signalling dissociation from it but the two traditions differ in which units they recruit and in whose voice the irony is staged.

In the Uzbek literary data the sarcastic cue is carried above all by folk proverbs (maqol) embedded in characters' speech and by idioms whose conventional evaluative charge is inverted. The satirists Abdulla Qahhor and Said Ahmad are the richest source [Botirov, 2026].

(a) Idiom with inverted evaluative charge. The idiom mayiz yemagan xotin ('a woman who has not eaten a raisin' = a chaste, blameless woman) supplies the title and the closing irony of Qahhor's story: the pious protagonist mocks other men's wives as less than virtuous, while the narrative reveals his own wife to be the guilty one, so the idiom’s positive charge is turned against him [Abdulla Qahhor, Mayiz yemagan xotin].

(b) Proverb as social satire. In O‘g‘ri (“The Thief”), a minor official voices the proverb-like maxim as received wisdom:

Fuqaroning arzga borishi, arbobning izzati bo‘ladi!
“A commoner’s coming to plead is the official’s honour!”

The communal authority of the saying is redirected into bitter mockery (achchiq masxara) of a bureaucracy whose prestige rests on the poor having to beg [Abdulla Qahhor, “O‘g‘ri”; Botirov, 2026]. In Ikki yorti bir butun, a conceited functionary’s self-aggrandizing proverb Ho‘l olib borib, quruq olib kelaman (“I take it in wet and bring it back dry,” i.e. “I can read anyone”) is framed by the author so that it exposes the speaker’s own vanity [Abdulla Qahhor, Ikki yorti bir butun; Botirov, 2026].

(c) Proverbial framing. Whole works are framed ironically by a proverb: Otning o‘limi itning bayrami (“The horse’s death is the dog’s feast”) serves as the epigraph to “O‘g‘ri”, setting the satirical key before the narrative begins [Abdulla Qahhor, “O‘g‘ri”].

In each case the proverb’s collective voice is turned against a speaker or social target, and the imagery is drawn from agrarian life and folk experience the farmer and his ox, the horse and the dog, the raisin as a token of purity.

3.2 English: mock-proverbs and anti-proverbs in the narratorial voice

In English the same echoic principle operates, but the canonical literary device is the mock-proverbial maxim or the twisted proverb (anti-proverb), frequently staged in the narrator's voice rather than in dialogue.

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(a) Mock-proverbial maxim. Austen's narrator opens Pride and Prejudice by voicing "a truth universally acknowledged" that a wealthy single man "must be in want of a wife" only to undercut it; the proverbial form of a universal generalization is itself the vehicle of the irony [Austen, 1813].

(b) Anti-proverb. The deliberate parody or alteration of an existing proverb for ironic and satirical effect the anti-proverb is a well-documented English device for sarcasm and critique [Mieder, 2004].

Here English literary sarcasm foregrounds individual, narratorial irony and the subversion or coining of a maxim, rather than the communal proverb deployed in a character's mouth.

3.3 Cross-linguistic contrast

The two traditions share the echoic mechanism but differ along three dimensions, summarized below.

Dimension	**Uzbek**	**English**
Unit recruited	Genuine folk proverbs and idioms in character dialogue	Mock-proverbial maxims and anti-proverbs, often narratorial
Dominant mechanism	Communal authority of the proverb redirected against a social target	Inversion or coining of a maxim to expose pretension
Cultural imagery	Agrarian, animal, hospitality/food	The universal-maxim convention itself
Orientation	Collectivist, social-critical (satire of officialdom, hypocrisy)	Individual, narratorial irony

In short, Uzbek sarcasm tends to quote the people's wisdom against an offender, whereas English sarcasm tends to parody or invent a maxim to puncture a pretension.

Discussion. The findings confirm that the underlying mechanism of phraseological and proverbial sarcasm is shared across the two languages, while its source material and staging are language- and culture-specific. The two traditions diverge, however, in which fixed expressions they recruit and in whose voice the irony is staged, and this divergence is interpretable in cultural terms. Uzbek literary sarcasm characteristically places a genuine folk proverb in a character's mouth and turns its communal authority against a social target: the bureaucracy whose "honour" rests on the poor man's pleading, the conceited official undone by his own boast. The proverb's force here derives from its status as shared wisdom, which a collectivist, hierarchy-conscious culture treats as weighty; and through politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) this status is doubly useful, since an impersonal proverb lets the speaker or the author deliver an off-record, face-threatening criticism under cover of received truth. The imagery confirms the cultural embedding (Telia, 1996; Maslova, 2001): the source domains are agrarian and folk the farmer and his ox, the horse and the dog, the raisin as a token of chastity so that Uzbek phraseological sarcasm is, in its very materials, a sarcasm of communal life.

English literary sarcasm, by contrast, more often works by coining a mock-proverbial maxim or by twisting an existing proverb (the anti-proverb; Mieder, 2004), and it tends to be staged in the narratorial voice rather than in dialogue. Austen's "truth universally acknowledged" is not a folk saying redirected against a character but a generalization the narrator invents in order to undercut it; the vehicle is the proverbial form itself, foregrounding an individual ironic intelligence. Where Uzbek quotes the people's wisdom against an offender, English parodies or fabricates a maxim to puncture a

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pretension a difference of orientation, collective versus individual, that aligns with broader contrasts between the two literary cultures.

The theoretical contribution is therefore twofold. First, the data extend the echoic account of irony from single utterances to the domain of phraseology and paremiology, showing that fixed expressions are not merely ornaments of sarcasm but among its most efficient vehicles, precisely because their conventional meaning is already public and therefore echoable. Second, the contrast demonstrates that the mechanism is shared while its realisation is culturally determined at two levels: the source material (authentic folk proverbs versus coined or subverted maxims) and the locus of staging (character dialogue versus narratorial voice). Each tradition, in keeping with the linguocultural claim advanced in the Introduction, recruits the fixed expressions most central to its own culture.

Conclusion. This contrastive study set out to examine how fixed expressions serve as vehicles of sarcasm in Uzbek and English. The analysis shows that both languages exploit the inherently echoic character of phraseology and proverbs re-voicing a unit whose conventional meaning is publicly known in order to signal dissociation from it so that the underlying pragmatic mechanism is shared. The two traditions diverge, however, in their materials and staging: Uzbek literary sarcasm characteristically embeds genuine folk proverbs and idioms in characters' speech, turning their communal authority against a social target, with imagery drawn from agrarian and folk life; English more often coins a mock-proverbial maxim or twists an existing proverb in the narratorial voice, foregrounding individual irony. The same echoic mechanism is thus realised through culturally specific resources, each tradition recruiting the fixed expressions most central to its own culture. Beyond offering a first contrastive account of Uzbek and English phraseological and proverbial sarcasm, the study shows that an adequate theory of sarcasm must treat fixed expressions not as ornament but as primary carriers, and must attend jointly to pragmatics, phraseology, and culture.

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