

Darkness And Light In Metaphorical Language: A Cognitive Study Across English And Turkic Languages

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Abstract: Metaphors of darkness and light are among the most entrenched conceptual structures through which speakers of many languages construe knowledge, emotion, morality and social order. Drawing on Cognitive Linguistics, this study provides a contrastive examination of English and three Turkic languages (Turkish, Uzbek and Kazakh), asking whether the same image-schematic oppositions underlie their discourse and how far culture reshapes the universal experiential basis. A 4.5-million-word balanced corpus of modern newspaper prose, fiction and academic writing in each language was queried for lexical items meaning “dark-/black-” and “light/bright/white” together with common collocates. Every concordance line was coded for source–target mappings according to Conceptual Metaphor Theory and statistically compared across languages. Qualitative close readings complemented the counts to expose culturally salient extensions such as divine illumination in Sufi Uzbek verse or socio-moral “whiteness” in Kazakh proverbial speech. Results reveal a stable cognitive template in which LIGHT indexes knowledge, moral approval and vitality whereas DARKNESS indexes ignorance, danger and emotional gravity, yet each language foregrounds different sub-domains and narrative frames. English displays a rational-secular orientation (“to shed light on a problem”), Turkish accentuates socio-political solidarity (“karanlık güçler” ‘dark forces’ for anti-democratic powers) and Uzbek preserves religious connotations (“nur topmoq” ‘to find light’ = receive divine guidance). These findings confirm that bodily experience grounds the metaphors but local history and ideology orchestrate their discursive salience. Pedagogically, explicit awareness of such metaphors can aid translation, intercultural pragmatics and vocabulary teaching in Turkic-English contexts.

Keywords: - Conceptual metaphor, darkness, light, Cognitive Linguistics, English, Turkish, Uzbek, Kazakh, cross-cultural semantics.

Introduction: Darkness and light constitute one of the oldest semantic dyads in human thought. From prehistoric cave art to digital journalism, people rely on the visual and kinaesthetic experience of moving from obscurity to illumination to construe epistemic, moral and emotional states. The foundational work of Lakoff and Johnson demonstrated that conceptual metaphors such as KNOWLEDGE IS LIGHT and IGNORANCE IS DARKNESS pervade English and shape reasoning far beyond poetic language. Subsequent studies expanded the inventory, showing that the same mappings organise Serbian, Spanish and Mandarin discourse. Cognitive linguists increasingly ask how universal bodily experience interacts with culture-specific beliefs, and

Turkic languages offer a fertile testing ground.

Turkic societies have for centuries negotiated Islamic cosmology, nomadic folklore and modern nation-state ideologies, all of which invest light with spiritual and political value while attributing darkness to chaos or oppression. Existing research on Turkish news commentaries confirms the metaphorical use of ışık ‘light’ and karanlık ‘darkness’ in moral evaluation, yet a systematic, corpus-based comparison across Turkic languages – and with English as a lingua franca of global science and media – remains absent. Such a comparison is timely for at least two reasons. First, English-Turkic contact intensifies through migration, business and technology, raising the risk of pragmatic

misunderstanding when metaphors are translated literally. Second, cognitive linguists increasingly explore how “big-data” corpus evidence can refine or challenge postulated universals.

The present study therefore investigates the following research questions:

Which conceptual metaphors involving darkness and light are most frequent in contemporary English, Turkish, Uzbek and Kazakh? To what extent do their source–target mappings coincide, and where do culturally grounded divergences emerge? How do genre and sociopolitical context modulate the metaphors’ evaluative force?

By combining quantitative corpus analysis with qualitative discourse interpretation, the article aims to enrich theoretical accounts of metaphor embodiment while offering practical insights for educators, translators and intercultural communicators operating between English and Turkic contexts.

Four balanced corpora, each containing 4.5 million words published between 2015 and 2024, were compiled. English data derived from the NOW sub-set of the Corpus of Contemporary American English; Turkish from the Türkçe Ulusal Derlemi; Uzbek and Kazakh from the National Corpora projects at Tashkent and Almaty universities. Genre proportions were harmonised (40 % journalistic prose, 30 % fiction, 30 % academic/non-fiction) to minimise register bias.

Seed lemmas (light, bright, white; dark, black) and their Turkic equivalents (ışık/nur/ak, karanlık/siyah/kara; yorug’lik, qora; jırıq, qara) formed the query list. The SketchEngine CQL interface retrieved 20 000 random concordance lines per language. Two trained coders annotated each line for metaphorical or literal use following the operational criteria of Conceptual Metaphor Theory: if the lexical item referred to non-physical knowledge, morality, emotion or social condition, it was coded as metaphorical. Metaphorical tokens were further classified by target domain (e.g., knowledge, morality, emotion) and valence (positive/negative). Inter-coder reliability reached $\kappa = 0.86$. Chi-square tests compared proportional distributions across languages.

Qualitative analysis selected exemplars with high collocational salience for close reading in their discourse context, tracing how cultural narratives or intertextual allusions shaped interpretation. Finally, a small focus group of eight professional translators (two per language) validated the pragmatic implications assigned to each metaphor type.

Across the aggregate sample, 67 % of light-related tokens and 62 % of dark-related tokens were

metaphorical, confirming their cognitive salience beyond literal illumination. English displayed the highest ratio of epistemic metaphors: expressions such as to shed light on, bring to light and in the dark about accounted for 48 % of all metaphorical instances. Statistical comparison revealed that knowledge metaphors were significantly more frequent in English than in any Turkic corpus ($\chi^2 = 412.5$, $p < 0.001$).

Turkish texts evidenced a markedly political orientation. Collocates of karanlık included güçler ‘forces’, odaklar ‘centres’ and odalar ‘rooms’, typically in commentaries on authoritarianism or covert networks. The phrase karanlık odaklar metaphorically framed perceived threats to democratic norms as darkness encroaching on civic space. Conversely, ılık co-occurred with gelecek ‘future’ and umut ‘hope’, foregrounding affective agency rather than epistemic clarity.

Uzbek data revealed a strong spiritual dimension. Nur ‘divine light’ patterned with hidoyat ‘guidance’ and yo’l ‘path’, revitalising Qur’ānic imagery in contemporary moral essays. Meanwhile, qorong’u metaphors indexed both ignorance and moral peril but less often political oppression. Kazakh usage bridged the other corpora: journalistic texts employed qara küşter ‘dark forces’ similarly to Turkish, whereas proverbial speech extolled aq jol ‘white road’ as a metaphor for virtuous life trajectories.

Emotion metaphors exhibited cross-linguistic convergence in evaluative polarity but differed in intensity. English fiction paired darkness with fear and depression, yet also exploited the bright side to invoke resilience. Turkic writers reserved nurli ‘full of light’ for elevated affection or religious awe, generating stronger emotional valence than English equivalents.

Genre analysis indicated that academic prose in all languages reduced metaphor frequency by roughly one-third compared with journalistic and literary registers, though English research articles retained the epistemic light of evidence cliché. Qualitative reading confirmed that cultural scripts modulate inferencing: Turkish readers interpret aydınlık yarınlar ‘bright tomorrows’ as a secular nationalist ideal, whereas Uzbek readers lean toward eschatological hope.

The corpus evidence supports the claim that embodied perception of light and darkness provides a universal experiential kernel for conceptual metaphors. Humans everywhere learn in infancy that vision, safety and orientation correlate with illumination, while obscurity prompts caution. These pre-conceptual schemata motivate similar metaphorical extensions across languages, explaining the statistical convergence observed. Nevertheless, universality does not entail

uniformity. The Turkic languages examined elaborate the metaphors in ways resonant with their socio-historical trajectories. Sufi poetry and Islamic didactics invest light with transcendent grace, a heritage still palpable in Uzbek prose. Republican Turkish discourse recruits the same schema to privilege secular enlightenment and collective agency, re-tooling the metaphor for modern nation-building. Kazakh data reflect the nominal dichotomy between nomadic ethics and post-Soviet state ideology, oscillating between moral individualism and civic rhetoric.

English, shaped by Enlightenment rationalism and empirical science, privileges cognitive clarity over moral purity. The prominence of epistemic light metaphors in research journalism mirrors a cultural valuation of transparency and evidence. Such divergence cautions against naïve literal translation: rendering Turkish *karanlık güçler* as “dark powers” in English mystery fiction may fit generic conventions, but in political commentary it risks unintended melodrama or mythic undertones.

Pedagogically, explicit instruction in conceptual metaphor can aid second-language learners to decode and produce figurative language, aligning with studies that report improved phrasal-verb acquisition when metaphors are taught overtly. For intercultural pragmatics, awareness that Uzbek *nur topmoq* signals moral rather than merely cognitive insight may prevent misinterpretation in diplomatic or religious dialogue.

Limitations of the study include the medium corpus size relative to mega-corpora and the absence of spoken data, which future work should address to capture colloquial metaphors such as code-switched youth slang. Psycholinguistic experiments could also test processing speed and affective ratings for each language’s metaphors, linking corpus frequency to cognitive salience.

Darkness and light remain potent cognitive instruments through which English and Turkic speakers construe the abstract world. Shared bodily grounding ensures broad semantic overlap, yet local histories script distinct moral, epistemic and affective nuances. Recognising both commonality and divergence enhances translation quality, cross-cultural competence and linguistic theory alike.

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