

A COMPARATIVE LINGUACULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE CONCEPT OF “MORALITY” AS A CULTURAL CATEGORY IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK

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Abstract: The lexemes “morality” in English and “axloq” in Uzbek both index normative behavior, but their semiotic load and discursive functions diverge sharply across cultures. In Anglophone contexts, “morality” is largely secularized, often entangled with Enlightenment rationalism, individual autonomy, and abstract universals. In contrast, the Uzbek term “axloq” remains embedded in traditional socioreligious structures, where Islam, family hierarchy, and collective honor (nomus) anchor its meaning. This paper explores how these linguistic forms instantiate culturally particular models of ethical subjectivity and social normativity.

Keywords: linguacultural analysis, moral lexicon, cultural conceptualization, Uzbek and English semantics, cross-cultural pragmatics, ethical discourse in literature, comparative moral linguistics

Introduction

Moral discourse is not a monolith. Rather, it is semiotically encoded and culturally mediated. When we analyze lexemes such as “morality” in English or “axloq” in Uzbek, we encounter not merely linguistic variants but divergent ethical worldviews. In Uzbek society, “axloq” permeates everyday interaction, from pedagogical slogans in schools to household expectations and sermons in the mosque. It invokes not only comportment but the sanctity of communal belonging.

In contrast, English-language usage of “morality” often emerges in philosophical, legal, and literary contexts, where it is abstracted from communal or theological frameworks and reconfigured through the prism of individual agency. Its resonance leans toward deliberation rather than obligation, critique rather than conformity.

This comparative inquiry draws on linguacultural theory (Wierzbicka, 1997; Sharifian, 2011), moral philosophy, and Islamic ethics to articulate the cultural ontologies embedded in these terms. It also considers the implications for cross-cultural communication and the translation of ethical discourse across languages.

Main Body. Historical Foundations and Epistemological Divergence

The epistemic genealogy of “morality” in the English-speaking world is rooted in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought. Immanuel Kant’s moral philosophy offers a paradigmatic example. His “categorical imperative”—to act only according to maxims that could be universal laws (Kant, 1785, p. 30)—distills morality into a function of rational autonomy. Morality becomes a deontic system founded not on divine command or social expectation, but on reason itself. This paradigm shifts the moral agent from a social actor to a rational self-legislator.

Meanwhile, in the Uzbek context, the conceptualization of axloq is informed by classical Islamic ethics. The term itself derives from the Arabic “akhlaq,” popularized in Central Asia through texts like Al-Ghazālī’s *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm ad-Dīn*, where axloq signifies not merely good manners but the internal cultivation of virtue (Al-Ghazālī, 1980, p. 120). Ibn Miskawayh’s *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq* (The Refinement

of Character) similarly situates morality within the soul's journey toward divine proximity and social harmony.

These divergent roots—Kantian secular universalism vs. Islamic teleological virtue—reveal the incompatibility of treating “morality” and “axloq” as synonymous beyond surface translation.

Discursive Contexts and Semantic Domains

The pragmatic distribution of the two terms also reveals much. In Anglophone discourse, “morality” is invoked in contexts where its boundaries are debated: public ethics (e.g., bioethics, judicial review), literature (e.g., tragic conflict), and political polemic. The term is reflexive, often qualified with “subjective,” “relative,” or “universal.” It is a site of contestation rather than consensus (Taylor, 1989, pp. 61–89).

By contrast, axloq is a prescriptive and stabilizing concept in Uzbek discourse. It is used evaluatively and normatively: axloqli qiz (a virtuous girl), axloqsiz odam (an immoral person). These collocations carry immediate social weight. They are not merely descriptive; they are performative, shaping reputations and intergenerational status.

As Yusupov (2016) has shown, axloq functions as both an internal compass and external discipline, enforced through language, pedagogy, and ritual (p. 44). Children are exposed to axloq saboqlari (moral lessons) in school, often derived from folklore, hadith, and proverbs. This corpus encodes an ethics of obedience, modesty, and reverence.

Religion, Modernity, and the Moral Subject

In many Western societies, particularly in secular Europe and liberal democracies, morality has been uncoupled from religious dogma. While Christianity historically underpinned Western moral thought, the rise of secular humanism and liberalism reoriented morality toward autonomy, rights, and universal reason (MacIntyre, 1981, pp. 38–47). This secularization has led to moral pluralism, where ethical debate is decentered and atomized.

In Uzbekistan, the post-Soviet Islamic revival has reintegrated axloq with religious piety. Even in secular institutions, moral conduct is evaluated through Islamic codes, often informally. For instance, modest clothing for women is not only religiously commended but morally imperative, with deviations seen as axloqsizlik (immorality). This is compounded by the concept of nomus (honor), a communal moral economy that governs social reputation, especially in gendered terms (Rasanayagam, 2011, pp. 103–107).

Thus, whereas the Western moral subject is a rational individual, the Uzbek moral subject is a relational actor, shaped by divine duty and social accountability.

Individual Autonomy vs. Social Embeddedness

A key point of divergence is the axis of moral authority. In English-language discourse, particularly post-1960s, morality is often equated with authenticity, personal choice, and subjective values. Jean-Paul Sartre's existential ethics encapsulates this: “Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself” (Sartre, 1946, p. 22). This valorization of personal freedom undergirds much of liberal moral theory.

In contrast, the Uzbek moral agent is enmeshed in a web of roles and duties. One's moral worth is measured by their fidelity to family, community, and faith. The idiom “axloqli bola—ota-onasining ko'zgusi” (a moral child is the mirror of their parents) exemplifies this collectivist moral grammar. Here, morality is not only internal virtue but also external performance, visible and evaluated by others.

This contrast resonates with Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions: Uzbek culture scores high on collectivism and uncertainty avoidance, fostering moral codes that prioritize conformity, ritual, and continuity.

Educational and Literary Reflections

Educational paradigms further institutionalize these differences. In Western classrooms, moral education emphasizes critical thinking, ethical dilemmas, and Socratic dialogue. Students are trained to navigate gray zones, question inherited norms, and articulate personal principles.

In Uzbek schools, moral education is less dialectical and more inculcative. Textbooks include lessons on *axloqiy tarbiya* (moral upbringing), integrating Islamic teachings with national identity. Literature, too, reflects these values. The works of Abdulla Qodiriy and Abdulla Oripov, for example, often valorize characters who embody self-sacrifice, modesty, and loyalty—virtues synonymous with *axloq*.

In contrast, English literature—e.g., in novels like George Eliot's *Middlemarch* or William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*—tends to depict moral ambiguity, internal conflict, and ethical complexity, aligning with a more introspective moral model.

Conclusion

To assume that “morality” and “*axloq*” are equivalent is to overlook the deep-seated cultural, philosophical, and religious architectures that shape their meanings. They represent distinct moral cartographies—one oriented toward individual freedom and universalism, the other toward collective responsibility and transcendental order.

For linguists, educators, and translators, this comparison underscores the need for cultural reflexivity in ethical discourse. For moral philosophers and literary scholars, it opens the door to comparative ethics grounded not in abstract universals but in lived moral worlds.

Ultimately, understanding morality as a cultural category requires us not only to translate words but to interpret worlds.

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