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SYMBOLIC MEANINGS OF VEHICLE INSCRIPTIONS IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK

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Abstract. The article analyses the symbolic meanings of inscriptions on vehicles (bumper stickers, rear-window texts, slogans, emblems and accompanying images on cars, taxis, buses and trucks) in English and Uzbek. Drawing on semiotics and linguoculturology, the study treats the vehicle as a mobile cultural text and its inscriptions as signs whose meaning goes beyond the literal content. The paper examines eight domains of symbolism: the vehicle itself, protection and blessing, colour and number symbolism, religious and ethical symbols, national and local identity, family and emotion, the metaphors of road and fate, and symbols of status and masculinity. The analysis suggests that Uzbek inscriptions mostly activate collectivist and sacral symbols (blessing, parents, fate, homeland, amulets), whereas English inscriptions more often use symbols of individual identity, affiliation, irony and personal freedom. Both traditions share the symbolism of the road as the path of life and of the vehicle as an extension of the self.

Keywords: vehicle inscriptions, symbolic meaning, semiotics, linguoculturology, bumper stickers, cultural code, English, Uzbek

Annotatsiya. Maqolada ingliz va o‘zbek tillaridagi transport vositalaridagi bitiklarning (avtomobil, taksi, avtobus va yuk mashinalaridagi yozuvlar, shiorlar, ramzlar va tasvirlar) ramziy ma’nolari tahlil qilinadi. Semiotika va lingvokulturologiya asosida transport vositasi harakatlanuvchi madaniy matn, bitiklar esa ma’nosi bevosita mazmunidan tashqariga chiqadigan belgilar sifatida o‘rganiladi. Tadqiqotda ramziylikning sakkizta sohasi: transport vositasining o‘zi, himoya va duo, rang va raqam ramzlari, diniy-axloqiy ramzlar, milliy va mahalliy o‘zlik, oila va his-tuyg‘u, yo‘l va taqdir metaforalari hamda maqom va mardlik ramzlari ko‘rib chiqiladi. Tahlil o‘zbek bitiklarida asosan jamoaviy va sakral ramzlar (duo, ota-ona, taqdir, vatan, tumor), ingliz bitiklarida esa individual o‘zlik, mansublik, ironiya va shaxsiy erkinlik ramzlari faolroq ishlatilishini ko‘rsatadi. Ikkala an’anada yo‘l – hayot yo‘li, transport vositasi esa shaxsning davomi sifatida talqin qilinadi.

Kalit so‘zlar: transport vositalaridagi bitiklar, ramziy ma’no, semiotika, lingvokulturologiya, bamper yozuvlari, madaniy kod, ingliz tili, o‘zbek tili

Аннотация. В статье анализируются символические значения надписей на транспортных средствах (наклеек на бамперах, текстов на заднем стекле, лозунгов, эмблем и сопровождающих изображений на легковых автомобилях, такси, автобусах и грузовиках) в английском и узбекском языках. На основе семиотики и лингвокультурологии транспортное средство рассматривается как подвижный культурный текст, а надписи как знаки, значение которых выходит за пределы буквального содержания. Исследуются восемь сфер символики: сам транспорт, защита и благословение, символика цвета и числа, религиозно-этические символы, национальная и местная идентичность, семья и эмоции, метафоры дороги и судьбы, символы статуса и мужественности. Анализ показывает, что в узбекских надписях преобладают

коллективистские и сакральные символы (благословение, родители, судьба, родина, амулеты), а в английских чаще используются символы индивидуальной идентичности, принадлежности, иронии и личной свободы. Для обеих традиций общими являются символика дороги как жизненного пути и образ автомобиля как продолжения личности.

Ключевые слова: надписи на транспорте, символическое значение, семиотика, лингвокультурология, наклейки на бампере, культурный код, английский язык, узбекский язык

1. Introduction

A short text on the rear window of a minibus or on the bumper of a private car is rarely only what it seems. The words “Ota duosi” (“Father’s blessing”) inform nobody about a fact; they invoke an entire system of respect, protection and gratitude. A fish-shaped emblem, a pair of blue beads hanging from a mirror, a heart in place of the word “love”, or the slogan “Not all who wander are lost” also work as signs that stand for something larger than their literal content. In other words, vehicle inscriptions are symbolic texts: their importance lies not in the information they transmit but in the meanings that the reader reconstructs from the cultural code shared with the author.

The aim of this article is to describe and compare the symbolic meanings of vehicle inscriptions in English and Uzbek. The study asks three questions. Which symbols are used most actively in each tradition? How are these symbols expressed linguistically, through words, formulae, numbers, colours and images? And what do the similarities and differences tell us about the cultural values of the two communities? Vehicle inscriptions are a convenient object for such a study because they are produced by ordinary speakers, they are not censored by institutions, and they are limited in size, so that every element has to “work” and tends to be heavily loaded with meaning.

The topic is relevant for the study of the linguistic landscape (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Gorter, 2006), for linguoculturology and for contrastive semiotics. In Uzbek linguistics the genre has so far received little attention as an independent object, and in English-language scholarship it has been studied mostly as a form of self-expression rather than as a system of cultural symbols compared with another language. The article attempts to fill this gap.

2. Theoretical Background

The notion of the sign is central to the study of symbolism. In the classical typology of Peirce (1931–1958), signs are divided into icons, which resemble their objects, indexes, which are physically or causally connected with them, and symbols, which are related to their objects by convention and by the habit of interpretation. Vehicle inscriptions use all three types: a drawing of a baby is an icon, a sticker indicating a driving school is an index of the driver’s status, and a word such as duo or the sign of the cross is a symbol whose interpretation depends on cultural convention. Eco (1976) emphasized that the production of signs is always a cultural activity, and Barthes (1972) showed that everyday objects and slogans acquire a second-order meaning, a “myth”, which presents a cultural value as something natural and self-evident. Lotman (1990) described culture as a semiosphere in which signs of different systems interact; the road, with its signs, vehicles and texts, is a small semiosphere of this kind.

Linguoculturology adds the idea that symbols are stored and transmitted through language, and especially through key words, concepts and precedent texts (Telia, 1996; Maslova, 2001; Karasik, 2002; Wierzbicka, 1997). A symbol in this sense is a concept with a rich cultural component: the word ota (“father”) in Uzbek is associated not only with a parent but with authority, protection and blessing. The cognitive-linguistic view, in turn, treats many symbols as

conceptual metaphors and metonymies, such as LIFE IS A JOURNEY (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2005). Dictionaries of symbols (Cirlot, 1971; Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996) and the interpretive approach of Geertz (1973), for whom culture is a web of meanings that people themselves have spun, provide additional background. Finally, the study of cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 2001) and of context (Hall, 1976) helps to explain why the symbols chosen in the two languages differ in character.

3. Materials and Methods

The research is qualitative and interpretive. The material consists of representative inscriptions and accompanying symbols of the kinds widely observed on passenger cars, taxis, minibuses, buses and trucks in English-speaking and Uzbek-speaking communities. As the aim is to describe the types of symbolic meaning and not their frequency, the article makes no statistical claims. Examples are given in the original language with a gloss where necessary, and Uzbek examples are cited in the modern Latin-based orthography. The method combines semiotic analysis (identification of the sign type and of its denotative and connotative meaning), linguocultural interpretation (reconstruction of the cultural concept behind the sign) and contrastive comparison. Since the meaning of a symbol depends on context, the same sign may be interpreted differently by different readers; the interpretations offered here are therefore tendencies supported by typical examples, not final judgements.

4. Analysis

4.1. The vehicle as a symbolic object

Before the inscriptions themselves are considered, it is important to note that the vehicle is a symbol. In both cultures the car is a sign of independence, mobility, success and social status, and in many places also of masculinity and adulthood. At the same time, it is a private space that is carried into the public one, a kind of “second home” in which the owner expresses personal values. This double nature explains why the owner decorates it with signs: the inscriptions turn a mass-produced object into a personal one. In Uzbek culture, a vehicle is often the means by which a man fulfils his responsibility for the family, and this is expressed in texts and images about parents, children and the road home. In English-language culture, the car is more often connected with the idea of freedom and self-expression, which is reflected in the abundance of individual and humorous slogans.

4.2. Symbols of protection and blessing

The most prominent symbolic domain in Uzbek inscriptions is protection. Words and formulae such as Ota duosi, Ona duosi, Ota-ona rozi bo‘lsin, Allohga shukur, Omin, Bismillah and Tavakkal function as verbal amulets. Their literal meanings are blessing, gratitude and trust, but their symbolic meaning is the shielding of the traveller from danger. The word duo is the central key word here: the parents’ prayer is believed to protect the child on the road, and a vehicle bearing the inscription is placed under this invisible protection. The same function is performed by non-verbal amulets, such as blue beads against the evil eye (ko‘z muncoq), small copies of religious texts, prayer beads and pendants. The expression Ko‘z tegmasin (“May no evil eye touch it”) combines both aspects, verbal and material.

English-language culture also has protective symbols, but they are different in type. Religious medals, a figure of a saint hanging from the mirror, a horseshoe or a rabbit’s foot belong to the domain of luck and superstition, and verbal formulae such as “Drive safe” or “God bless America” are rather statements of attitude than amulet-like speech acts. The most widespread protective symbol of English-language driving culture is the sign “Baby on board”, which is symbolically a request for protection of the vulnerable and a reminder of social

responsibility. It is a secular, institutionalized protective sign, whereas the Uzbek protective symbols draw their power from the sacral authority of the family and religion.

4.3. Colour and number symbolism

Colour and number are among the oldest symbolic systems. In Uzbek, the colour white is connected with purity, peace and good fortune: the expression oq yo‘l (“white road”) is a wish for a successful journey, and in the phrase oq yo‘l tilayman the white colour is a symbol of auspiciousness. Green is associated with Islam, spring and life, blue with the sky, protection and the evil eye, and black, in a traditional context, with sorrow or danger. In English-language culture, colours on vehicles often carry associations with groups and causes: a rainbow flag or ribbon, a yellow ribbon for support of soldiers, a pink ribbon for cancer awareness, or the red cross for medical help. The colour thus serves as a sign of affiliation or solidarity, and the meaning is often established by public campaigns.

Numbers also carry symbolic meaning. In Uzbek and more generally in Muslim cultural contexts, the number seven is traditionally regarded as lucky and complete, the number 786 is used as a numerical representation of the formula Bismillah, and certain numbers on a licence plate are valued as prestigious. In English-language culture, the number 13 is stereotypically a sign of bad luck and 7 of good fortune, while numbers such as 69 or 420 in humorous stickers belong to youth subcultures and are understood only by insiders. Numbers on vehicles are therefore a typical case where the same sign has a cultural meaning that cannot be understood from the sign alone.

4.4. Religious and ethical symbols

Religious symbols are the main carriers of ethical meaning on vehicles. In Uzbek inscriptions the religious symbolism is usually implicit and part of everyday speech: the words Allohga shukur or Sabr (“patience”) convey the Islamic virtues of gratitude and endurance. Images of mosques, the Kaaba, calligraphic inscriptions or a pair of hands in prayer are frequent complements. In English-language practice, the symbols are much more visible and often function as markers of identity: the fish emblem, the cross, the Star of David, a crescent, or slogans such as “Jesus is my co-pilot”. The same space is also used by opposing symbols, such as parodies of religious emblems and slogans of secular movements. Thus, while in the Uzbek context religious symbols create a shared sacred background, in the English-language context they are positions in a public dialogue.

4.5. National and local identity symbols

Symbols of nation, region and community are widespread in both traditions. In Uzbek, flags, the state emblem, ornamental patterns, images of historical monuments and the names of regions or cities express belonging. The word vatan (“homeland”) and the names of native places are among the cultural key words, and a historical figure or a poetic line may serve as a symbol of national dignity. Animal symbols such as the lion, the eagle or the wolf appear as signs of strength and courage and have roots in older Turkic imagery. In English-language practice, national and local symbols include flags, state outlines, sports team logos, and place-based slogans such as “I ♥ [city]”, as well as military and veteran insignia. These signs often express fan or group loyalty and are therefore strongly connected with the ideas of club and community, rather than with the ideas of ancestry and homeland.

4.6. Family and emotion

Family and emotion form a domain in which the two traditions come close to each other but remain different. In both, the heart sign is the universal symbol of love, and the images of children, wives, mothers and pets are common. English-language stickers typically show the family in a playful or celebratory manner (stick-figure families, “My kid is an honor student”,

"Mom taxi") and thereby make the family part of the driver's public self-image. In Uzbek inscriptions the family is more often present as a source of authority and moral obligation: texts such as Onajonim, Farzandlarim uchun or Ota-onamga rahmat ("Thanks to my parents") express gratitude and responsibility. The sign here is not decoration but a statement of the moral position of the driver, and the diminutive and affectionate suffixes in these words add emotional symbolism.

4.7. Metaphors of ROAD, WHEEL and FATE

The conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY organizes a large number of inscriptions in both languages. The road is a symbol of life, the vehicle is a symbol of the person, and the destination is a symbol of the goal or the end of life. English texts such as "Life is a journey, enjoy the ride" or "Not all who wander are lost" stress freedom, exploration and personal choice. Uzbek texts such as Yo'l bo'lsin, Oq yo'l, Dunyo o'tkinchi ("This world is transitory") or the proverbial Yo'l yurgan yetar manzilga ("He who walks the road will reach the destination") stress patience, fate and moral testing. The steering wheel and the wheel itself can symbolize destiny, and the picture of a wing or of an eagle on a truck symbolizes speed and freedom.

A particularly interesting symbol is the idea of "the last road". In some Uzbek inscriptions on older vehicles one finds reflections on the fragility of life that connect the road with the idea of death and with the need to behave honourably, as in sayings that remind that the world is a temporary stop. English-language equivalents are more often ironic: "I'm not speeding, I'm qualifying" or "Live fast". The same metaphor therefore receives two different emotional colourings: a serious and spiritual one in the first case and a playful and individualist one in the second.

4.8. Symbols of status, power and masculinity

Vehicle inscriptions are also used as signs of status. Slogans such as "Boss", "King of the road", "Winner" or "Speed" in English and the same words, often borrowed, in Uzbek-language practice display ambition and strength. Images of predatory animals, flames, engines and fast cars serve as symbols of power. In Uzbek culture such signs are often combined with signs of respect for elders and honour, so that the image of a strong man is balanced by the image of a responsible son and a father. In English-language culture, the symbolism of status is more frequently ironic, as in "My other car is a Porsche" or "Eat my dust", where the status is claimed through humour and exaggeration. The female driver is often symbolized in both languages by the images of flowers, butterflies and hearts or by humorous slogans about independence.

5. Discussion

Table 1 summarizes the symbolic domains and their typical realizations. It must be stressed that the oppositions are tendencies: English-speaking drivers also use family and religious symbols, and Uzbek drivers also use humour and global youth symbols. Nevertheless, a clear pattern emerges.

Table 1. Symbolic domains of vehicle inscriptions in English and Uzbek

Symbolic domain	English inscriptions	Uzbek inscriptions
Vehicle	Freedom, self-expression, status	Family responsibility, status, mobility
Protection	Baby on board, medals, luck charms	Duo, Ko'z tegmasin, blue beads, prayers

Symbolic domain	English inscriptions	Uzbek inscriptions
Colour and number	Ribbons and flags as affiliation; 13, 7	White road (oq yo‘l), green, blue; 7, 786
Religion and ethics	Fish, cross, slogans; open identity claims	Allohga shukur, sabr, tavakkal; shared background
Nation and place	Team logos, flags, I ♥ [city]	Flag, ornament, vatan, region names
Family and emotion	Playful family images, hearts	Gratitude to parents, diminutive forms
Road and fate	Journey, freedom, irony	Patience, fate, transitory world
Status	Irony, exaggeration (Boss, King)	Strength balanced by respect and honour

First, the Uzbek corpus is dominated by sacral and collectivist symbolism, in which the authority comes from outside the individual: from parents, God, ancestors and the homeland. This is consistent with Hofstede’s (2001) description of collectivist cultures and with the high-context nature of Uzbek communication : the symbol is short because the reader is expected to know its meaning. Second, in the English-language corpus the authority of the symbol comes from the individual or from a freely chosen group; the symbols mark identity, opinions and membership, and they are often ironic or playful. Third, both traditions use the road as the central metaphor of life and the vehicle as an extension of the self, which suggests a universal base on which culturally specific meanings are built.

The study has some limitations. The symbolic meaning of an inscription is not fixed, and the same sign may be read as sincere, ironic or purely decorative. In modern societies, the symbols also circulate globally through the internet, which leads to hybrid forms, such as Uzbek vehicles carrying English slogans and international emblems. For this reason, the interpretation of each symbol should take into account the context, the type of vehicle, the age of the driver and the place of observation. These questions can be investigated further on a larger, systematically collected corpus.

6. Conclusion

The article has analysed the symbolic meanings of vehicle inscriptions in English and Uzbek on the basis of semiotic and linguocultural approaches. The main results are as follows. First, vehicle inscriptions are symbolic texts whose meaning goes beyond their literal content and depends on shared cultural codes. Second, eight domains of symbolism were distinguished: the vehicle as a symbol, protection and blessing, colour and number, religious and ethical symbols, national and local identity, family and emotion, the metaphors of road and fate, and symbols of status. Third, Uzbek inscriptions are dominated by collectivist, sacral and family-centred symbols with the key word duo, while English inscriptions foreground individual identity, group affiliation, humour and freedom. Fourth, both traditions interpret the road as the path of life and the vehicle as an extension of the self.

The results may be used in teaching intercultural communication, in the compilation of dictionaries of cultural symbols and in further comparative research on the linguistic landscape. Future studies should rely on a large photographic corpus with detailed metadata and should

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include other languages of the region, in order to define more precisely which symbols are universal and which are culture-specific.

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