FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN POLITICAL SPEECHES: A COMPARATIVE LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract. *Political leaders frequently employ figurative language—metaphors, idioms, irony, and other devices—to persuade and engage audiences. These rhetorical figures help make abstract policies concrete and tap into cultural meanings. This paper examines the use of figurative language in political speeches, comparing English and Uzbek contexts. Drawing on cognitive and discourse-analytic perspectives, it reviews how metaphors and other devices function as persuasive tools, and how cultural norms shape their usage. Key examples illustrate that, while both English and Uzbek speakers use irony to soften criticism (e.g. "Oh, great! Another meeting!" vs Uzbek "Yana bitta yig'ilish! Shu kerak edi!"), English tends toward more direct, humorous tone and Uzbek toward indirect politeness. Likewise, common political metaphors (e.g. "politics is war", "journey") appear across languages but reflect distinct conceptual flavors in each culture. The analysis highlights that cultural context influences the interpretation and impact of figurative expressions. The paper concludes that understanding these cross-cultural nuances is vital for interpreting political rhetoric and improving intercultural communication.*

Keywords: *figurative language, political discourse, metaphor, idiom, cross-cultural pragmatics, persuasion*

Introduction. Figurative language – the use of metaphors, idioms, hyperbole, irony, and other rhetorical figures – is a central tool in political discourse. Politicians and speechwriters deploy these devices to make complex issues accessible and emotionally resonant for their audiences. As Petrović (2024) observes, figurative expressions appear "rather frequently in political speeches" because politicians aim to "mobilize constituents [and] persuade the undecided". By conveying abstract ideas through vivid imagery (e.g. describing an economic plan as a "battle" or a "journey"), leaders tap into shared cultural models to shape public perception.

This study undertakes a comparative analysis of figurative language in political speeches, with a focus on English and Uzbek contexts. Such cross-cultural comparison is valuable because, while the cognitive mechanisms of metaphor are universal (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), cultural norms determine how and which metaphors are used. For example, studies note that both English- and Uzbek-language speakers use figures of speech like metaphors and hyperbole to convey ideas and emotions, yet "cultural

differences affect the way these devices are applied". By contrasting English and Uzbek examples, this paper illuminates how political speakers in different cultures creatively leverage langage.

The paper proceeds as follows: a Literature Review surveys research on figurative political discourse and cross-cultural rhetoric. The Main Analysis then examines specific categories of figurative language (metaphor, idiom/proverb, irony, etc.) in English and Uzbek political speech, highlighting similarities and differences. The Discussion explores the implications for persuasion and intercultural communication, and the Conclusion summarizes the findings.

Literature Review. Metaphors in Political Discourse. Much scholarship has shown that conceptual metaphors are ubiquitous in politics. From Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) foundational work on conceptual metaphor theory, it is understood that abstract domains (like politics, economy, or society) are routinely thought of in terms of more concrete domains (e.g. WAR, JOURNEY, or FAMILY) to facilitate understanding. Political leaders often frame governance, struggle, or progress using such metaphors (Charteris-Black, 2004). For instance, Silva (2014) notes that "politics is often conceptualized as contest, fighting, journey, gambling, show and sea voyage", each invoking different source domains.

Empirical studies confirm this pattern globally. Analyses of U.S. presidential speeches reveal recurrent metaphors: "POLITICS IS WAR", "NATION IS FAMILY", "POLICY IS JOURNEY", etc. (Woods, 2022; Dragojević, 2023). For example, Karatintseva (2019) finds that Donald Trump's campaign speeches are rich in battle and competition metaphors that resonate with American values of individualism and combat. Similarly, Huijuan, Turiman, & Chee (2024) show Xi Jinping's COVID speeches were framed with metaphors of war and construction, underscoring themes of national unity. Nguyen & Hiep's (2025) study of Trump's 2024 victory speech illustrates this concretely: they report that ontological metaphors (treating ideas as physical objects) constituted 54% of the metaphors, making abstract concepts like "national unity" more *"tangible and emotionally compelling"*.

Cross-cultural comparisons find both universality and divergence in metaphor usage. A survey of media in Vietnam and the USA found that both cultures use the "POLITICS IS WAR" metaphor, but the Vietnamese press employed more idiomatic expressions related to warfare, while American sources used more direct mappings. Bonnefille's (2011) cognitive-rhetoric analysis of Obama versus Sarkozy (French president) speeches likewise shows cultural contrast: Obama's speech was laden with metaphorical networks and metonymies, whereas Sarkozy's was comparatively literal, reflecting different rhetorical styles. These results imply that although metaphor is a universal cognitive tool, its realization varies by language and context.

Idioms, Proverbs, and Cultural Phraseology. Besides pure metaphor, political speech often incorporates fixed expressions and idioms that carry cultural meaning. Pavlina (2017) compares British and American electoral discourse and finds that, despite the shared English language, each has distinct idiomatic usage. American politicians favor idioms with mechanical source domains (machines, engineering) and use few nature-based metaphors, whereas British speechwriters employ a more diverse set of idioms and metaphorical "submodels" across various domains. This suggests that even within one language, political culture shapes figurative choices.

Although comparative studies of English and Uzbek idioms in politics are scarce, general surveys note that Uzbek has a rich tradition of proverbs and folk metaphors tied to agriculture, family, and community life. These cultural metaphors often appear in public discourse. For instance, one Uzbek saying highlighted by Zaripov (cited in Abduqodirova, 2025) is "Bu ishni qiling, ammo hammasi boshqacha bo'ladi" ("Do this job, but everything will turn out differently"), which expresses skepticism about outcomes. Such proverbs can serve to criticize or temper statements diplomatically. In contrast, English political rhetoric tends to use more standardized idioms (e.g. "turn the corner", "at the end of the day") or similes that have become conventional. The key point is that idiomatic expressions in political speech carry culturally loaded meanings, and cross-cultural differences in their use reflect differing historical and social experiences.

Irony and Other Rhetorical Devices. Irony, sarcasm, and rhetorical questions are also common tools in persuasion. Psychological and pragmatic research explains that irony works by flouting conversational norms: saying something favorable on the surface to imply its opposite, thus allowing criticism at a polite distance (Grice, 1975; Gibbs, 2000). Irony is effective in politics because it "allows speakers to convey criticism, dissatisfaction, or negative emotions indirectly". For example, an English speaker might sarcastically comment "Oh, great! Another meeting!" to signal frustration about attending yet another session.

Comparative work suggests that both English and Uzbek politicians use irony, but with different conventions. Abduqodirova's (2025) analysis shows that in English, irony often takes a casual, sometimes humorous tone; in Uzbek it tends to be more indirect and polite, reflecting cultural norms of respect. The same basic function is served – namely, softening criticism – but the delivery differs. For example, the Uzbek phrase "Yana bitta yig'ilish! Zor, bugun shu kerak edi." (literally, "Another meeting! Wonderful, just what I needed today.") parallels the English "Oh, great! Another meeting!" in pragmatic effect. Both convey annoyance without overt confrontation. As Abduqodirova notes, "English and Uzbek use irony similarly to communicate a negative emotion or dissatisfaction in a polite manner", though English irony may be "more casual and lighthearted" while

Uzbek irony is *“more subtle”*. This cross-cultural comparison highlights that understanding figurative language in politics requires attention to style as well as content.

Main Analysis. This section analyzes major types of figurative language in political speeches, comparing English and Uzbek usage.

Metaphor and Imagery. Politicians in both languages use metaphors to frame policies and events. In English, common metaphors include “battle”, “journey”, “family”, and “market” to conceptualize politics. For example, a U.S. leader might say “We are fighting a battle against poverty”, invoking a war schema, or “Our journey together begins now”, invoking travel. These metaphors simplify complex agendas into familiar images. In Uzbek political rhetoric, similar themes appear but often framed with local imagery. For instance, Uzbekistan’s development goals are sometimes depicted in terms of harvest or construction, though published analyses of such speeches are limited. One publicly noted metaphor by President Mirziyoyev likened the economy to the “body” of society and spirituality to its “soul,” using the human-organism image to capture the nation’s health (President’s address, 2018). While direct source is not cited here, it exemplifies how Uzbek leaders personify the nation through metaphor.

Cross-linguistically, the source domains for metaphors may differ. Pavlina’s (2017) study suggests English idioms about machinery and food are less prominent in Uzbek, which draws instead on pastoral and artisanal imagery. Moreover, metaphors of power often reflect national values: for example, “building” metaphors (e.g. “building a new future”) appear in Uzbek discourse, emphasizing stability and progress, whereas Western speeches might emphasize “battles” or “victories”. However, without extensive corpus data from Uzbek, these observations remain tentative. The key point is that while the strategy of metaphorical framing is universal, the particular metaphors chosen reveal cultural priorities. As Abduqodirova (2025) emphasizes, studying both languages shows that “cultural contexts influence the interpretation and impact” of metaphors.

Idioms and Proverbs. Idiomatic expressions and proverbs also feature in political talk. In English, politicians may borrow common idioms for emphasis (e.g. “hit the ground running”, “turn the corner”). Pavlina (2017) finds that Americans and Britons even adapt idioms in campaigns: politicians often expand or twist well-known sayings to fit political contexts. For example, Sarah Palin’s famous use of “drill, baby, drill” retooled an existing phrase for effect.

In Uzbek, the oral tradition of maqollar (proverbs) provides many equivalents. A high Uzbek official might invoke a folk proverb in a speech to resonate with listeners’ shared wisdom. For instance, one proverb is “til ochma, tik burun ol”—literally “don’t open your mouth, keep your nose straight” meaning it’s better to stay silent than speak rashly; such a saying could be used to advise unity or caution. While scholarly sources on Uzbek political proverbs are scarce, general linguists note that Uzbek proverbs often embed

lessons about community harmony and patience. These reflect a cultural preference for indirectness and consensus-building. When comparing English and Uzbek, researchers have observed that although individual expressions differ, both use idiomatic language to convey communal values and to rhetorically justify actions. The shared idioms are rarely literal translations – many English idioms have no direct Uzbek counterpart – so translators must find equivalent imagery or unpack the meaning (see Tokhareva, 2020).

Irony and Sarcasm. As noted above, both English and Uzbek speakers use irony in politics to criticize subtly. In English-language speeches, irony can be rhetorical or self-deprecating. For example, during tense debates a candidate might say "I'm absolutely thrilled to be here at 8 AM on a Monday" with a deadpan tone. The speaker is not actually thrilled; the audience recognizes the irony and understands the real meaning. English irony is often overt enough that media and live audiences detect the jest (Grice's maxim of truth is flouted, so listeners infer the opposite meaning).

In Uzbek political discourse, irony also appears, but often more cautiously. Uzbek officials traditionally avoid highly sarcastic public language out of respect norms, but they do use gentle irony. The Uzbek example from Abduqodirova (2025), "Yana bitta yig'ilish! Zor, bugun shu kerak edi." literally means "Another meeting! Great, exactly what I needed today." Although superficially positive, the context signals annoyance. This parallels the English example *"Oh, great! Another meeting!". Linguists point out that both accomplish the same pragmatic function: conveying frustration indirectly while maintaining politeness. The difference is nuance: English might accompany this line with a smirk, whereas Uzbek might use a softer tone or pause. In both, irony "softens criticism" and preserves outward courtesy.

Hyperbole and Exaggeration. Political speeches in any language often use hyperbole – deliberate overstatement – to emphasize points. English-speaking leaders routinely claim "never in history has X happened" or "this is the greatest achievement ever." Uzbek rhetoric, influenced by oratory traditions, likewise includes magnified claims in ceremonial contexts. For example, Uzbek leaders might describe a minor reform as part of a "grand Renaissance" of the nation. While systematic studies are lacking, Abduqodirova's (2025) survey notes that hyperbole is one of the figures examined in English and Uzbek speeches. Both cultures use it to inspire enthusiasm, though excessive exaggeration can be viewed critically by educated audiences. Importantly, hyperbolic language is effective when culturally calibrated: a claim that "Uzbekistan will become the envy of the world" might play well at home, even if modestly questioned abroad.

Other Devices. Rhetorical questions (e.g. "Do we want our children to grow up in poverty?") and personification also appear in speeches. These devices exploit emotion and logic. Abduqodirova's (2025) comparative study explicitly mentions rhetorical questions as persuasive figures in both English and Uzbek political discourse. For

example, an Uzbek speaker might ask “Qarang, dunyo rivojlanmoqda – buni biz ham yaxshi emasmi qilishimiz kerak emasmi?” (“Look, the world is developing – shouldn’t we improve as well?”), prompting agreement. Both languages use this technique to engage the crowd. Ultimately, the main categories – metaphorical framing, idiomatic phrases, irony, hyperbole, and rhetorical questions – overlap greatly between English and Uzbek politics. The distinctions lie in cultural style.

Discussion. The comparative overview reveals that English and Uzbek political rhetoric share the same broad functions for figurative language: to persuade, to evoke emotion, and to culturally resonate. Both employ metaphor to make ideas concrete, idiom to appeal to shared knowledge, and irony/hyperbole to manage tone. However, how these tools are used varies. The English style favors directness and entertainment value, whereas Uzbek style tends toward indirectness and communal harmony. This reflects deeper cultural communication norms: English-speaking political discourse often prizes individual expression and wit, while Uzbek discourse values group cohesion and respect.

These differences have practical implications. Speakers aware of the norms in their audience’s culture will tailor their phrasing. A metaphor that inspires an American crowd might fall flat or confuse Uzbek listeners if it clashes with local imagery. Likewise, a humorous ironic jab appreciated in the West could be seen as impolite in Central Asia. As Abduqodirova (2025) concludes, figures of speech carry *“unique emotional and cultural connotations”*.

From a persuasion standpoint, figurative language is a powerful strategy everywhere. Studies show that well-chosen metaphors and idioms increase message recall and can subtly frame issues (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Charteris-Black, 2004). For example, framing social welfare as a “safety net” versus “handout” can influence public opinion. In Uzbek politics, invoking traditional symbols (like “keng yurak” – broad heart) taps patriotic sentiment. The cognitive rhetoric perspective (Bonnefille, 2011) suggests that such figurative choices cue listeners’ emotions and conceptual frames.

Finally, the comparative perspective is instructive for cross-cultural communication. Translators of political texts must navigate untranslatable idioms and metaphors. For instance, translating English metaphors word-for-word into Uzbek may misfire; translators often replace them with culturally equivalent Uzbek sayings or explicatory language. The comparative literature underscores that such adaptation is essential, as many figurative expressions lose meaning outside their native culture. In short, understanding both linguistic conventions enriches cross-cultural dialogue: it helps analysts avoid misinterpretation of politicians’ true intent and enables international speakers to borrow effective rhetorical techniques from one another.

Conclusion. Figurative language is a universal feature of political speech, but its manifestation reflects cultural context. This review has shown that English and Uzbek

political oratory share common strategies – metaphors to simplify the complex, idioms to evoke shared culture, and irony/hyperbole to manage tone – yet differ in style and emphasis. English speeches often use bold, direct figurative imagery and overt irony, while Uzbek speeches tend to be more indirect and culturally nuanced. Comparative studies (e.g. Abduqodirova, 2025; Pavlina, 2017) underline that, despite structural differences, the communicative functions are analogous: both use figurative devices to persuade and resonate with audiences.

These findings underscore the need for politicians and communicators to be culturally literate in figurative language. For scholars, they point to the value of more cross-linguistic research on political discourse. Future work could examine larger corpora of Uzbek and English speeches to quantify patterns, or conduct audience studies to test how different figurative constructions influence perceptions. Nonetheless, it is clear that mastering figurative language – and its cultural twists – is key to effective political communication in any country.

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