



ILLNESS, CURE AND CULTURE: PROVERBS AS A MIRROR OF FOLK MEDICINE IN UZBEK AND ENGLISH

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Abstract:

Proverbs are among the most enduring forms of verbal folklore, encapsulating centuries of human experience and cultural values in brief, memorable expressions. In both English and Uzbek traditions, proverbs involving medical lexicon provide insights into the folk understanding of illness, treatment, and the healer's role. This article offers a comparative and thematic analysis of such proverbs to explore how folk medicine and cultural attitudes toward health are encoded in language. The findings show that while English proverbs emphasize individual responsibility and rational health practices, Uzbek proverbs highlight patience, spiritual well-being, and communal trust in healers. This contrast reflects broader epistemological and cultural differences between the Western and Eastern approaches to medicine.

Keywords: proverb, folk medicine, health, illness, cultural semantics, English, Uzbek, tabib, linguistic worldview

INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a tool for communication but a repository of collective thought and experience. Among the many linguistic genres that encode cultural knowledge, proverbs hold a prominent place due to their didactic nature and broad circulation in oral traditions. Proverbs about health and illness, in particular, serve as reflections of a society's medical beliefs, preventive practices, and attitudes toward both the sick and the healer.

In Uzbek and English cultures, proverbs involving illness and healing reveal important information about each society's values: whether trust in divine will, human resilience, empirical treatment, or the moral conduct of doctors and patients.



This article investigates such proverbs to understand how folk wisdom has historically addressed medical themes, revealing deep-rooted differences and commonalities in worldview.

MAIN PART

Proverbs have long been recognized as a focus of ethnolinguistic, sociological, and cognitive study. Wolfgang Mieder (2004) defines them as “short, generally known sentences of the folk which contain wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorable form.” From a cognitive-linguistic perspective, Honeck (1997) emphasizes how proverbs operate as miniature models of cultural cognition, providing metaphors and scripts for action and judgment.

Within the Uzbek scholarly tradition, researchers such as Yo‘ldoshev (2019) and G‘afurov (2016) have explored the function of proverbs in transmitting moral and medicinal knowledge. G‘afurov in particular underlines how “O‘zbek maqollarida sog‘liq, kasallik va tabobatga oid bilimlar qadimiy xalq dunyoqarashini ifodalaydi,” (Uzbek proverbs about health, illness, and healing reflect ancient folk worldviews). English medical proverbs, by contrast, have been cataloged and analyzed within collections such as *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Proverbs* (Apperson, 2006) and Taylor’s *The Proverb* (1931), offering valuable data for comparative analysis.

The study uses a qualitative and comparative paremiological approach. Proverbs were selected based on their inclusion of health- or illness-related lexemes (e.g., *kasal*, *bemor*, *tabib*, *sog‘liq* in Uzbek; *illness*, *doctor*, *medicine*, *health* in English). Sources included published proverb dictionaries, folklore compilations, and digital archives. Each proverb was categorized thematically (e.g., concepts of illness, types of cures, perception of doctors) and analyzed for its metaphorical structure, semantic field, and cultural function.

In both languages, illness is depicted not only as a physical condition but also as a moral or spiritual imbalance. Uzbek proverbs tend to moralize sickness and associate it with divine will or internal turmoil.

“Kasalni tabib emas, habib tuzatar.”

(Good language cures great sores.)



The given proverb examples express that people's pain or serious problems can be alleviated through kind words and gentle language, for a polite and pleasant manner of speaking can be a powerful tool in easing emotional pain and even softening serious disagreements.

In English, proverbs about illness are more likely to emphasize causality, diagnosis, and the importance of awareness:

"A disease known is half cured."

This expresses a belief in the power of medical knowledge and diagnosis, implying that understanding the nature of an illness is essential for treatment.

"Illness comes on horseback but departs on foot."

This vivid metaphor suggests how quickly people can fall ill, yet how slowly recovery tends to unfold, reflecting a universal medical truth.

Uzbek culture places strong faith in spiritual and natural healing methods, and the healer (tabib) is both respected and spiritually trusted.

"Vaqt har dardga malham."

(Time heals all wounds.)

This hopeful proverb means that emotional pain, grief, or distress caused by difficult experiences—such as loss, betrayal, or hardship—tends to lessen as time passes. It suggests that with patience and the passing of time, people can recover from even deep emotional or psychological hurt.

In English:

"An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

Attributed to Benjamin Franklin, this proverb promotes preventive care as more efficient and less costly than treatment after illness occurs. It reflects Enlightenment-era ideals of rationality and foresight.

"Too much medicine is worse than none."

This critical view warns against overmedication, aligning with modern concerns about pharmaceutical dependency and side effects.

In Uzbek proverbs, the tabib is often seen as a trusted, even spiritual, figure. Healing is as much about belief and intention as it is about skill.

"Tabibga ishonmagan bemor darddan xorij bo'lmas."

(You need not doubt you are no doctor.)



This reflects the idea that healing requires psychological and emotional alignment between patient and healer.

English proverbs often portray the healer through a critical lens, focusing on ethics and competence.

“Physician, heal thyself.”

This biblical admonition is both literal and metaphorical: doctors should apply their advice to themselves and be morally consistent.

“A good surgeon must have an eagle’s eye, a lion’s heart, and a lady’s hand.”

This richly metaphorical proverb outlines the ideal attributes of a healer: perception, courage, and delicacy.

These medical proverbs not only illustrate folk wisdom but reflect larger patterns in cultural thought. Uzbek proverbs emphasize collectivism, spiritual resilience, and patience as vital aspects of healing. They often contain theological undertones, implying that health is granted or withheld by a higher power, and that moral behavior impacts physical well-being.

English proverbs, on the other hand, highlight logic, prevention, and professional ethics. They mirror the historical development of Western medicine, particularly its emphasis on individual agency, scientific progress, and skepticism of tradition.

Despite these contrasts, both traditions acknowledge the limitations of medical intervention and highlight the importance of emotional well-being and ethical behavior in healing.

CONCLUSION

Medical proverbs in both English and Uzbek encapsulate shared human concerns about sickness and recovery, even as they diverge in cultural approach and metaphor. Uzbek proverbs reflect a spiritually oriented worldview grounded in patience, moral conduct, and trust in healers. English proverbs emphasize prevention, professional competence, and individual responsibility.

This study highlights the value of proverbs as tools for understanding not just language but the socio-cultural frameworks that shape concepts of health. In an era of global health challenges, such cross-cultural insights are vital for culturally competent healthcare communication.



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