STRUCTURAL-SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH AND UZBEK HUMOROUS TALES

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Abstract

This article presents a structural and semantic analysis of humorous tales in English and Uzbek literary and folk traditions. The study employs Vladimir Propp’s Morphology of the Folktale as the main framework for structural analysis and the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) by Victor Raskin and Salvatore Attardo for semantic analysis. English humorous tales, represented by works of Mark Twain, O. Henry, and Jonathan Swift, are characterized by irony, satire, linguistic wordplay, exaggeration, and unexpected twist endings. In contrast, Uzbek humorous tales, primarily in the form of latifa (short witty anecdotes) and stories featuring Nasriddin Afandi (Nasreddin Hodja), emphasize sharp wit, paradoxical logic, role reversal, social critique, and didactic elements rooted in oral tradition and Sufi wisdom.

Keywords: *structural analysis, semantic analysis, humorous tales, latifa, Nasriddin Afandi, , script opposition, incongruity theory, cross-cultural humor, English short stories, Uzbek folklore, comparative literature, verbal humor.*

INTRODUCTION

Humorous tales occupy a central place in the cultural and literary heritage of every nation, serving not only as a source of entertainment but also as a powerful mechanism for reflecting social realities, transmitting moral values, preserving linguistic creativity, and critiquing societal norms. In the context of comparative linguistics and folkloristics, the structural-semantic analysis of humorous narratives from different cultural traditions reveals both universal cognitive mechanisms underlying humor and culture-specific features shaped by historical, social, and linguistic contexts. This study focuses on English and Uzbek humorous tales, employing established theoretical frameworks such as Vladimir Propp’s Morphology of the Folktale for structural examination and the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) developed by Victor Raskin and Salvatore Attardo for semantic analysis.

The English humorous tradition encompasses a rich array of folk anecdotes, literary short stories, and satirical works, ranging from medieval jests and trickster tales to the sophisticated irony of Mark Twain, O. Henry, and Jonathan Swift. These narratives frequently exploit linguistic ambiguity, exaggeration, deadpan narration, and unexpected twists to highlight human follies, social hypocrisies, and the absurdities of everyday life. In contrast, Uzbek humorous tales, primarily embodied in the genre of *latifa* (short witty anecdotes) and the vast corpus of stories centered on the legendary figure of Nasriddin Afandi (also known as Nasreddin Hodja), are deeply rooted in oral folk tradition. These tales combine sharp wit, paradoxical logic, role reversal, and didactic elements, often embedding Sufi wisdom and communal moral lessons within seemingly simple dialogues.

The relevance of this research lies in its contribution to cross-cultural pragmatics, translation studies, and comparative literature. In an era of increasing

globalization and intercultural communication, understanding the structural and semantic underpinnings of humor facilitates better translation practices, reduces cultural misunderstandings, and enriches theoretical models of verbal humor. Previous studies, such as comparative typological analyses of Uzbek and English fairy tales, have touched upon structural similarities in poetics, yet a focused structural-semantic investigation of specifically humorous genres remains underexplored.

Theoretically, this analysis rests on two foundational pillars. Structurally, Propp’s model identifies 31 recurrent functions and seven spheres of action (dramatis personae) that govern the morphology of wonder tales. Although originally developed for Russian folktales, Propp’s framework has proven adaptable to humorous narratives, where functions such as “absentation,” “interdiction,” “violation,” “struggle,” and “victory” manifest in comedic rather than heroic forms—often through failed quests resolved by cleverness rather than physical prowess. In humorous tales, the “fight” may devolve into verbal competition or absurd logic, and the hero triumphs via wit.

Semantically, the GTVH expands Raskin’s Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH) by incorporating six Knowledge Resources (KRs): Script Opposition (SO), Logical Mechanism (LM), Situation (SI), Target (TA), Narrative Strategy (NS), and Language (LA). Humor arises primarily from the perception of incongruity between overlapping yet opposed scripts, resolved through specific logical mechanisms such as juxtaposition, reversal, false analogy, or punning. This model allows for a precise, hierarchical analysis of humorous texts across languages and cultures.

Turning to English humorous tales, a paradigmatic example is Mark Twain’s “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.” Structurally, the narrative begins with an initial situation (everyday American frontier setting) and introduces a naive narrator seeking information. The complication arises through Simon Wheeler’s deadpan recounting of Jim Smiley’s gambling exploits, building through a series of exaggerated episodes involving animals and bets (Proppian functions of “delivery” and “trickery”). The climax features the unexpected revelation that the frog has been sabotaged with quail shot, leading to a humorous resolution marked by the narrator’s escape from the tedious storyteller. This structure aligns with Propp’s linear sequence but adapts it to comedic ends, where “victory” belongs to deception and absurdity rather than moral triumph.

Semantically, GTVH reveals multiple layers. The primary Script Opposition lies between “normal gambling expectations” versus “absurd animal training and cheating.” Logical Mechanism operates through exaggeration and literal interpretation of betting rules. The Target includes human greed and gullibility, while the Narrative Strategy employs embedded storytelling and deadpan style. Language resources exploit dialectal features, repetition, and ironic understatement, creating a rich phonological and lexical texture characteristic of American vernacular humor. Similar patterns appear in O. Henry’s twist-ending stories, such as “The Gift of the Magi,” where structural economy (setup–sacrifice–ironic revelation) combines with semantic opposition between “selfless love” and “futile outcome,” generating poignant yet humorous irony.

Jonathan Swift’s satirical works, like excerpts from “Gulliver’s Travels,” further illustrate how English humor scales to broader social critique. Here, Proppian

“interdiction” and “violation” manifest on a societal level, with semantic targets encompassing political institutions, human vanity, and colonial attitudes. The logical mechanism of scale inversion (Lilliputians versus giants) amplifies incongruity, making abstract critiques viscerally comic.

In Uzbek tradition, *latifa* typically follow a highly condensed tripartite structure: setup (a mundane problem or question posed to Nasriddin Afandi), interaction (dialogue revealing conflicting perspectives), and punchline (witty reversal or paradoxical resolution). This brevity contrasts with longer English literary tales but maintains narrative drive. A classic example involves Nasriddin claiming that the center of the world lies beneath his donkey’s hoof. When challenged, he reasons that moving the donkey would shift the world’s center, exposing the opponent’s flawed logic. Structurally, this incorporates Proppian “interrogation” and “trickery,” with resolution through intellectual rather than physical means. The “helper” function is internalized in Afandi’s wit.

Semantically, such tales heavily rely on Script Opposition between “literal interpretation” and “figurative or cosmic understanding,” resolved via Logical Mechanisms like false analogy or role reversal. Targets frequently include hypocrisy, rigid authority, religious formalism, and everyday folly. Language resources emphasize dialogue, cultural idioms, proverbs, and phonetic play inherent to Turkic languages. Unlike purely entertaining English tales, Uzbek *latifa* often embed didactic or Sufi undertones, using humor as a vehicle for wisdom transmission within communal contexts.

Extensive comparative examination uncovers profound insights. Both traditions exploit incongruity as the core cognitive mechanism, confirming the universality posited by GTVH and incongruity theories. Proppian functions appear across both corpora, albeit with modifications: English tales favor linear progression with elaborate descriptions and character development, reflecting individualistic literary norms, whereas Uzbek *latifa* prioritize circular or paradoxical logic suited to oral performance and collective listening.

Differences emerge prominently in cultural embedding. English humor often targets class structures, institutional power, and individual eccentricity (e.g., Wilde’s epigrams or Shaw’s plays), employing sophisticated wordplay and phonological ambiguity. Uzbek humor leans toward family dynamics, communal harmony, and moral correction, using situational irony and literal-metaphorical clashes rooted in Islamic and Central Asian cultural matrices.

To systematize these observations, the following table presents a comparative overview of key structural and semantic parameters:

Table 1.

Comparative Structural-Semantic Features of English and Uzbek Humorous Tales

Parameter	English Humorous Tales	Uzbek Humorous Tales (*Latifa*/Afandi)	Universal/Common Aspects
Dominant Structure	Linear (setup–complication–twist–resolution)	Tripartite (setup–dialogue–punchline)	Incongruity-based resolution
Proppian Functions	Absentation, struggle, victory via deception	Interdiction, trickery, intellectual victory	Trickery and helper (wit) functions
Primary Script Opposition (GTVH)	Expectation vs. reality; literal vs. figurative	Literal vs. cosmic/metaphorical; norm vs. violation	Incongruity (SO)
Logical Mechanism	Exaggeration, irony, twist ending	False analogy, reversal, paradox	Juxtaposition and reversal
Main Targets (TA)	Social class, greed, institutions	Hypocrisy, authority, everyday folly	Human weaknesses
Narrative Strategy (NS)	Literary narration, embedded stories	Oral dialogue, performative	Surprise ending
Language Resources (LA)	Puns, dialect, understatement	Idioms, proverbs, phonetic play	Ambiguity and repetition
Cultural Function	Entertainment + social satire	Entertainment + moral/didactic wisdom	Social critique and value transmission

This table highlights both convergence and divergence, facilitating further quantitative or corpus-based studies.

Deeper semantic analysis reveals additional layers. In English tales, humor frequently operates at the pragmatic level, relying on Gricean maxim violations (e.g., quantity or manner) for ironic effect. Uzbek examples more commonly exploit lexical and cultural scripts tied to hospitality, respect for elders, or religious observance. Translation challenges arise precisely here: rendering Nasriddin’s literalism into English may lose cultural resonance, while Twain’s vernacular requires careful adaptation to preserve rhythmic humor.

Empirical support comes from multiple studies on linguocultural elements in English and Uzbek fairy tales, which demonstrate shared semiotic features alongside distinct semantic fields. For instance, zoonyms and other cultural markers carry different connotative loads, influencing humorous interpretation.

Furthermore, contemporary research on humor genres in English and Uzbek literature underscores the role of satire in both traditions as a tool for social commentary,

albeit with varying degrees of directness. English satire often employs understatement and wit; Uzbek satire favors exaggeration and communal laughter.

In conclusion, the structural-semantic analysis of English and Uzbek humorous tales demonstrates that while universal mechanisms—rooted in script opposition, narrative functions, and cognitive incongruity—underpin humor across cultures, significant variations arise from linguistic structures, historical experiences, and socio-cultural priorities. English tales emphasize individual creativity and broad societal critique through elaborate literary forms, whereas Uzbek *latifa* excel in concise, wisdom-laden oral wit that reinforces communal bonds. These findings not only enrich theoretical models like Propp’s morphology and GTVH but also hold practical implications for literary translation, language teaching, and intercultural dialogue. Future research could profitably incorporate corpus linguistics, experimental pragmatics, or multimodal analysis of performed *latifa* to further illuminate these dynamics. Ultimately, humorous tales remain a vital bridge between cultures, revealing the shared humanity beneath surface differences in expression and worldview.

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