FROM *MAGIC* TO *SEHR*: A CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF MAGICAL CONCEPTS IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK

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Abstract

There isn't a single, widely recognized definition of magic, as demonstrated by contemporary anthropology and linguistics. Jesper Sorensen offers a commonly used working definition, pointing out that the term's roots are in the Greek words magos and mageia (from Persian magus, the priestly caste): "magic is about changing the state or essence of persons, objects, acts and events through special, non-trivial actions and representations." This paper provides a linguistic and cultural comparison between magic and sehr, aiming to clarify how the concepts function within their respective societies. Understanding these distinctions is important for translation studies, intercultural communication, and anthropology.

Key words

magic, anthropology, linguistics, religion, superstition

Аннотация

Единого, общепринятого определения магии не существует, что подтверждается современными исследованиями в антропологии и лингвистике. Еспер Сёренсен предлагает часто используемое рабочее определение, указывая на то, что корни этого термина происходят от греческих слов magos и mageia (от персидского magus, жреческого сословия): «магия — это изменение состояния или сущности людей, объектов, действий и событий посредством особых, нетривиальных действий и представлений». В данной статье представлено лингвистическое и культурное сравнение между *magic* и *сехр*, направленное на уточнение того, как эти понятия функционируют в соответствующих обществах. Понимание этих различий важно для переводоведения, межкультурной коммуникации и антропологии.

Annotatsiya

Antropologiya va tilshunoslikning zamonaviy tadqiqotlari ko'rsatganidek, sehrning yagona, umumiy tan olingan ta'rifi mavjud emas. Jesper Sorensen keng qo'llaniladigan ta'rifni taklif qilib, atamaning ildizlari yunoncha *magos* va *mageia* (forscha magus, ruhoniy tabaqa) so'zlariga borib taqalishini ta'kidlaydi: «sehr — bu odamlar, obyektlar, harakatlar va hodisalar holati yoki mohiyatini maxsus, noodatiy amallar va tasvirlar orqali o'zgartirishdir». Ushbu maqolada *"sehr"* va *"magic"* o'rtasidagi lingvistik va madaniy taqqoslash keltirilgan bo'lib, bu tushunchalarning o'z jamiyatlarida qanday ishlashini aniqlashtirish maqsad qilingan. Ushbu farqlarni tushunish tarjimashunoslik, madaniyatlararo muloqot va antropologiya uchun muhimdir.

Introduction. The concept of magic has historically resisted precise definition across cultures. Anthropology commonly treats magic as a system of beliefs and practices concerning supernatural causation (Frazer, 1922; Malinowski, 1948). Sorensen (2007) provides a frequently referenced working definition: *"magic is about changing the state or essence of persons, objects, acts, and events through special, non-trivial actions and representations."* This definition highlights the symbolic and performative nature of magic rather than focusing solely on supernatural forces. In the English-speaking world, *magic* functions across several semantic fields: supernatural practices (e.g., ritual magic), entertainment (stage magic), and metaphorical expressions ("a magical evening"). In contrast, the Uzbek term *sehr* tends to hold a narrower, more culturally embedded set of meanings, often linked to Islamic moral frameworks and traditional folk practices (Rahmonov, 2015).

Methods and Materials. This study applies a qualitative, comparative linguistic approach, drawing on:

Lexical-semantic analysis: Definitions from English and Uzbek dictionaries, semantic fields, and common collocations.

Anthropological literature: Foundational works on magic (Frazer, 1922; Mauss, 1972; Sørensen, 2007)

Cultural examples: Folklore motifs, idiomatic expressions, and everyday usage in both languages.

Corpus-based observation: Illustrative examples taken from publicly accessible English corpora (such as COCA) and Uzbek public media/literary sources where *sehr* or *sehrli* are commonly used.

The method is descriptive and interpretive, aiming to identify patterns rather than measure frequencies.

Analysis

Etymological and Historical Background

The English *magic* derives from Greek *magos* and *mageia*, originally referencing Persian magi, a priestly caste (Sørensen, 2007). Over centuries, English developed a broad semantic field including:

supernatural power,

illusion (stage magic),

metaphoric excellence.

Uzbek *sehr*, from Persian–Arabic roots, is traditionally associated with:

supernatural influence,

sorcery or enchantment,

morally ambivalent but often negative practices (Karimov, 2018).

Where English expands toward secular metaphor, Uzbek retains closer ties to religious moral discourse

Semantic Fields and Connotations

English *magic*

English divides the concept into several domains:

Supernatural magic: "ancient magic," "dark magic."

Entertainment: "magic tricks," "magician."

Metaphor: "a magic solution," "that song is magic."

Metaphorical use tends to be positive, associating magic with wonder, beauty, or excellence.

Uzbek *sehr*

Uzbek semantic fields tend to be:

Supernatural sorcery: "sehr-jodu" (sorcery), "sehrgar" (sorcerer).

Moral-religious domain: Often framed negatively, associated with deception or forbidden acts in Islamic contexts (Rahmonov, 2015).

Limited metaphorical use: *Sehrli* ("magical") appears in children's literature ("sehrli ertak") but is less common in adult metaphorical speech.

Thus, *magic* is semantically versatile, while *sehr* carries heavier cultural and moral weight.

Discussion. The findings show that while both *magic* and *sehr* relate to the idea of altering reality through non-ordinary means, their cultural load differs significantly. Sørensen's definition (2007) works cross-culturally because it emphasizes transformation through symbolic action, which both societies recognize. However, the social meanings diverge. In English, magic is semantically diffuse and commonly positive. English can describe a concert, a meal, or an experience as "magical," demonstrating a metaphorical extension tied to beauty or

excellence. In Uzbek, metaphorical broadening is more restricted. Adults rarely describe everyday beauty or excellence as *sehrli* unless referring to children's literature, fantasy, or poetic imagery. This suggests that the Uzbek semantic field remains more constrained by religious and social frameworks. These differences underscore how language reflects cultural values: English culture embraces secular enchantment, whereas Uzbek discourse maintains boundaries between the permissible and the forbidden, reflecting its cultural and religious history.

Conclusion. This cross-cultural analysis shows that while English *magic* and Uzbek *sehr* share structural features characteristic of magical concepts worldwide—supernatural transformation, symbolic action, and ritual association—their cultural valences diverge notably. English uses *magic* across entertainment, spirituality, and everyday metaphors, often with positive connotations. Uzbek *sehr* remains more closely tied to religious and moral norms, typically connoting taboo or danger outside fictional contexts. These distinctions illustrate how linguistic concepts of magic are shaped by cultural histories and value systems. Understanding these differences is essential for accurate translation, intercultural communication, and anthropological analysis.

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