



**SYMBOLIC MEANINGS OF NUMBERS IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK
FOLKLORE AND PAREMIOLOGY**

Abdusalomov Doniyor Tog‘ayali o‘g‘li
Teacher at Termez State Pedagogical Institute
dtagalizada@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article explores how numbers carry symbolic meanings in the folklore and proverbs of English and Uzbek cultures. Through a cross-cultural comparison, it highlights which numerals, such as 3, 7, 9, 40, recur as “magic” or sacred numbers in each tradition and what cultural values or beliefs they signify. English folklore often emphasizes numbers like three and seven, whereas Uzbek folklore and paremiology frequently feature numbers like seven and fort. Drawing on scholarly sources, the study analyzes specific examples from both cultures’ oral traditions and paremiological corpora, illustrating both similarities and differences. Ultimately, this comparative analysis reveals how numerical symbolism in proverbs and folk narratives encodes each nation’s worldview, moral lessons, and aesthetic preferences.

KEYWORDS

Folklore; Proverbs;
Paremiology; Number
symbolism; Cultural
comparison; English;
Uzbek.

INTRODUCTION

Numbers in folklore and proverbial language are more than just counting tools, they are carriers of cultural meaning. Around the world, certain numerals recur in myths, fairy tales, and sayings, often imbued with symbolic or mystical significance. For example, the number *seven* is considered a “lucky” or sacred number in many Western traditions, while the number *forty* carries deep connotations of transition or completion in many Islamic and Central Asian contexts. Studying these symbolic meanings across cultures can shed light on shared human patterns of thought as well as unique cultural identities.

In this article, we will examine the symbolic significance of numbers in the folklore and paremiology of English and Uzbek cultures. English proverbs and folk narratives have long utilized certain numbers, like three, seven, nine, thirteen, etc. in conveying moral lessons or supernatural beliefs. Uzbek folklore, part of the broader Turkic cultural sphere, similarly features “sacred” numbers, notably three, seven, nine, forty, among others, deeply embedded in its traditional worldview. By comparing examples from both English and Uzbek sources, we aim to identify which numerals carry special symbolic weight in each culture’s folklore and proverbs, and how their usage reflects cultural values, historical influences, and universal folklore motifs.

The comparison will be pertinent because, despite vast differences between Anglo-European and Central Asian cultures, the recurrence of certain “magic numbers” suggests some universality in folk

psychology. At the same time, differences in number usage, for instance, the prominence of 40 in Uzbek sayings versus its relative rarity in English, highlight how religion, environment, and historical experience shape paremiological preferences. Through a literature-informed analysis, this study will explore these similarities and differences, contributing to cross-cultural paremiology and understanding of numerical symbolism in language.

Literature Review

Scholars in folklore, anthropology, and linguistics have long noted that numbers often function symbolically in traditional narratives. Dundes famously analyzed the symbolism of numbers in cultural narratives, observing that what might appear to be “random” numbers in folk texts are frequently intentional and carry shared meanings within a culture [1, 43-45]. Likewise, in the field of paremiology, researchers have found that proverbs across many languages use numerals in formulaic ways to encapsulate wisdom or social norms [2, 38]. Numbers like 3, 4, 7, etc. are called “traditional” or “magic” numbers because of their prevalence in folk genres worldwide.

In the English-speaking tradition, the influence of the Bible and Western folklore has cemented certain numbers with specific connotations. The number 3 often signifies completeness or a decisive turn of events, for example, “*third time’s the charm*” is a popular saying. The number 7 is associated with luck, perfection, or divine will, for instance, *seven days of Creation*, *seven years of bad luck if a mirror breaks*. The number 9 appears in proverbial phrases like “*a stitch in time saves nine*” and “*a cat has nine lives*”, often symbolizing a large but bounded number or ultimate degree of something. Conversely, 13 is infamous as an “unlucky” number in Anglo-American culture, often traced to the Last Supper’s thirteen attendees, though proverbs with 13 are few, the cultural superstition is strong. Scholars like Annemarie Schimmel have surveyed such number lore, noting that seven stands out across many civilizations as “*the number of perfection*”, while the cultural aversion to thirteen is more localized to Western traditions [3, 22-27].

Uzbek and broader Turkic folklore share some of the universal “magic numbers” but with their own flavor and emphasis. Ethnographic and linguistic studies highlight 3, 7, 9, 40 as particularly significant in Central Asian traditions [4, 58-64], [5, 41-47]. For example, the number 40, which is translated to “*qirq*”, is deeply embedded in Uzbek customs and sayings, it often symbolizes a period of trial or completion, such as *forty days of mourning* or quarantine, the “*forty girls*” of legend who defend their land, etc.. In Uzbek oral literature, groups of forty frequently appear, suggesting that “40” traditionally meant a large multitude or a whole community. Seven, “*yeti*” in Uzbek, is another revered number. In many Uzbek proverbs, seven represents plurality or great extent, and is associated with positive outcomes. At the same time, scholars note that what one culture holds sacred another may not, for instance, medieval Mongols regarded seven as a sign of evil and preferred 9 or 10, illustrating that numerical symbolism is culturally constructed.

Comparative paremiological research directly examining English and Uzbek has begun to emerge. Bafoyev conducted a functional-semantic analysis of numbers in Uzbek and German proverbs, confirming that in Uzbek paremiology the numbers “one, two, three, seven, forty, and a thousand” appear most frequently and carry rich metaphorical meaning. He and others point out that numbers in proverbs can serve both literal quantitative functions and metaphorical or hyperbolic functions [6, 323-329]. A contrastive study by Pardayeva found that Uzbek proverbs overall use numerals more often than English ones, often as exaggeration or intensifiers [7, 3-5]. For example, where an English

proverb might state a general truth with no number, the Uzbek equivalent might insert a number to strengthen the image, such as “*Murder will out*” versus “*Qing’ir ishning qiyig’i qirq yildan keyin ham chiqadi*” – “A crooked deed’s flaw will come out even after forty years”. These studies collectively underscore that understanding the usage of numbers in proverbs is key to understanding each culture’s mentality and aesthetic of expression.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative comparative methodology grounded in paremiological and folkloristic analysis. Data were collected from authoritative collections of English and Uzbek proverbs, folklore texts, and scholarly secondary sources focusing on numerical symbolism. The selected corpus includes proverbs, sayings, and folk narratives containing numerals with symbolic potential, notably 3, 7, 9, 13, and 40. These examples were analyzed using descriptive, functional-semantic, and contrastive methods to identify recurring numerical patterns, symbolic meanings, and pragmatic functions within each culture. Contextual interpretation was applied to determine how numerical meanings are shaped by historical, religious, and cultural factors. Finally, a cross-cultural comparison was conducted to reveal both universal tendencies and culture-specific features in the use of numbers in English and Uzbek folklore and paremiology.

Analysis

English folklore exhibits a strong predilection for certain numbers, notably three and seven, which serve as archetypal “folkloric numbers”. The number *three* is perhaps the most pervasive; many English fairy tales and nursery rhymes revolve around triads, reflecting the narrative principle often called the “rule of three”. This principle makes stories more memorable and satisfying, as seen in tales like *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* or *The Three Little Pigs*. In proverbs, three also appears to signal completeness or the decisive attempt, “*Third time’s the charm*” implies that the third try will succeed where the first two failed. Likewise, the saying “*Bad luck comes in threes*” suggests an observed pattern that misfortunes tend to cluster in three, an attempt to find meaning in randomness by grouping by three. Culturally, three has been interpreted as a number of harmony and resolution, perhaps stemming from its disruption of the polarity of two. As folklorist K. S. Buvala notes, the third attempt in stories often succeeds because the third actor learns from the first two mistakes. Thus, in English lore, “three” often embodies completeness, culmination, or luck.

The number *seven* in English culture carries strong positive connotations rooted in biblical and classical tradition. Seven is frequently termed a “lucky” or sacred number. English idioms and folklore reference seven in contexts of fortune or totality, for example, finding a seventh son of a seventh son is a trope for special powers in folk belief. Proverbs themselves sometimes invoke seven to denote a large but intuitively graspable quantity, as in “*Seven years of bad luck*” if one breaks a mirror. This superstition shows how seven can signify a fateful cycle. Historically, the prevalence of seven is linked to the biblical seven days of creation, the idea of seven heavens, and other religious or cosmic schemas. The English phrase “the Seven Ages of Man” (written by Shakespeare) further exemplifies seven as symbolizing the entirety of human life in stages. Overall, seven in English proverbial lore represents completeness, perfection, or fate, usually with a positive or at least significant aura.

Uzbek folklore, inheriting from both ancient Turkic tradition and Islamic influence, shares some of the “universal” significant numbers but also uniquely emphasizes certain numerals. One of the most

prominent is “*qirq*”, the number forty. In Uzbek culture, 40 signifies a large comprehensive number or a completion of cycles. It is deeply woven into rituals and sayings, for example, there is a custom of “*qirq kun*”, forty days in English, of mourning after a death, reflecting the belief that the soul’s journey or a family’s deepest grief lasts forty days. Folklore motifs like “*qirq qiz*”, forty maidens, defending their land, or epic heroes having forty companions, use the number to imply multitude and unity. Uzbek proverbs frequently use 40 hyperbolically to denote “very many” or “very much”. Several examples illustrate this, “*Yomon xotinning hiylasi qirq tuyaga yuk*” – “A bad wife’s trickery is the load of forty camels”, meaning one woman’s deceit can be enormously burdensome. Even abstract concepts get the forty-treatment in Uzbek lore, “*Gapning tagi qirq ma’no*” – “A phrase has forty meanings,” highlighting the deep, perhaps endless interpretations of what someone says. Clearly, forty in Uzbek tradition stands for abundance, completeness, or the ultimate extent of something, much as “hundred” or “thousand” might in other cultures.

The number seven is another cornerstone of Uzbek symbolic numbers. As in many cultures, seven is regarded positively, Uzbek folklore considers seven a bearer of goodness or divine favor. Uzbek proverbs often employ seven to indicate plurality or thoroughness. A well-known Uzbek proverb says, “*Yetti o’lchab, bir kes*” – “Measure seven times, cut once”, which is analogous to the English “Measure twice, cut once”, but the Uzbek version amplifies the caution by using seven instead of two. This suggests that in the Uzbek mindset, *extreme carefulness* is counseled, where English uses a smaller number, a cultural preference for hyperbole in intensifying the lesson. Another proverb states, “*Bir bolaga yetti mahalla – ota-ona*”, meaning “For a child, seven neighbors are (like) parents”, implying that in raising a child, not only their parents but the whole neighborhood is responsible. Here seven signifies the community at large.

Conclusion

Numbers in proverbs and folklore act as a cultural code, compressing complex ideas into a simple numeric figure that audiences intuitively grasp. This comparative study of English and Uzbek traditions demonstrates that certain numerical symbols have a broad human appeal and recur in the moral and mythical narratives of very different societies. Such commonalities likely arise from similar narrative structures or ancient symbolic archetypes that transcend individual cultures.

At the same time, the distinct ways in which other numbers are employed, the Uzbek affection for hyperbolic counts like 40 or 100 to make a point, versus the English wariness of the number 13, for example, highlight how numbers also serve as a mirror of cultural identity. They reflect what each culture finds meaningful or ominous, for Uzbeks, forty carries the weight of spiritual and communal completeness; for English-speakers, thirteen triggers thoughts of misfortune. Even when both cultures use the same number, subtle differences in meaning can be observed, shaped by different proverbial contexts and historical influences (as seen with the number two and its nuances).

In English and Uzbek proverbs alike, numbers fulfill rhetorical functions, they make proverbs catchy, rhythmic, and authoritative. They also help dramatize the lesson, saying “seven times” instead of “many times” or “forty years” instead of “a long time” gives a vivid specificity that resonates with listeners. The didactic power of proverbs is thus often tied to these little numerical symbols that carry big connotations.

In conclusion, exploring the symbolic meanings of numbers across cultures like English and Uzbek not only enriches our understanding of paremiology but also provides insight into how different

peoples perceive order, luck, and magnitude. It shows that while we all use numbers to quantify our world, we also imbue them with qualitative values drawn from our cultural experience. As languages and folklore continue to evolve, these numerical symbols remain as compact carriers of collective wisdom, a testament to the human tendency to find meaning in numbers beyond their face value, whether one is recounting an English fairy tale or an Uzbek maqol. Future research may expand this comparison to other cultures, further illuminating the universal and particular in the folklore of numbers.

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