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River Names as Cultural Mirrors: a Cognitive-Linguistic Analysis of British and Uzbek Hydronyms

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Abstract: River names, or hydronyms, represent one of the most stable and conservative elements of language, preserving ancient linguistic strata, settlement patterns, and cultural worldviews across millennia. As fundamental geographical features that sustain life and define boundaries, rivers retain names that often outlast the civilizations that created them, functioning as linguistic fossils embedded in the landscape. This study presents a comparative cognitive-linguistic analysis of hydronyms in Great Britain and Uzbekistan, two geographically and culturally distant regions, to investigate how river names serve as cultural mirrors reflecting distinct historical trajectories and environmental realities. The research employs a qualitative, comparative-descriptive methodology, analyzing etymological and historical data to examine linguistic origins, semantic motivations, and socio-cultural functions of major river names in both regions. The analysis reveals that while British and Uzbek hydronyms share universal cognitive naming principles—particularly descriptive naming based on salient physical features—they diverge significantly in their cultural content and environmental priorities. British river names predominantly derive from ancient Celtic and pre-Celtic Indo-European roots, emphasizing aesthetic qualities such as color and flow, and frequently referencing pre-Christian deities. Uzbek hydronyms, shaped by Persian and Turkic influences, reflect the paramount economic importance of water in an arid landscape, the legacy of Silk Road civilizations, and the role of rivers as arbiters of imperial history. The study demonstrates that hydronymic analysis provides a powerful methodological tool for accessing deep cultural memory, revealing how environmental context fundamentally shapes the cognitive frameworks through which societies perceive and name their natural world.

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1. Introduction

Place names, or toponyms, are more than simple labels on a map; they are linguistic artifacts, rich with historical, cultural, and cognitive significance. Among the most enduring of these are hydronyms—the names of water bodies. Rivers, as fundamental features of the landscape that sustain life, guide migration, and define boundaries, often retain names that are millennia old, outlasting the speakers of the languages from which they originated [1]. These names act as "linguistic fossils," preserving traces of history, migration patterns, and ancient worldviews across generations [2].

The study of hydronyms from a cognitive-linguistic perspective allows us to move beyond pure etymology and explore how people perceive, interpret, and conceptualize these vital geographical features [3]. This approach investigates the mental processes involved when people encounter river names, uncovering the underlying concepts, meanings, and cultural schemas associated with them. A name is not arbitrary but is the

product of a cognitive act of categorization and meaning-making, reflecting what a particular culture deemed significant about a river—be it its color, its speed, its divine nature, or its economic value [4].

This paper undertakes a comparative cognitive-linguistic analysis of hydronyms from two geographically and culturally disparate regions: Great Britain and Uzbekistan. Britain, an island nation, possesses a hydronymic landscape deeply stratified with pre-Celtic, Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, and Norse layers [5]. Uzbekistan, located at the heart of Central Asia, features a river system whose names are inscribed with the legacies of Persian and Turkic peoples, the history of vast empires, and the economic lifeblood of the Silk Road [6].

The primary objective is to examine how the river names in these two regions serve as cultural mirrors. By comparing their linguistic origins, semantic motivations, and socio-cultural functions, we can illuminate both universal cognitive tendencies in naming and the unique historical and environmental factors that shape cultural identity. This comparative approach reveals not only what these names mean, but what they tell us about the people who bestowed them and the worlds they inhabited. The paper will proceed by establishing a theoretical framework, outlining the methodology, presenting a detailed comparative analysis, and offering conclusions on the value of hydronymy in understanding the deep connections between language, cognition, and culture.

Theoretical Background

The analytical foundation of this paper rests at the intersection of onomastics, the study of proper names, and cognitive linguistics. Hydronymy, a specialized subset of toponymy (the study of place names), focuses specifically on the names of water bodies. Hydronyms are considered one of the most stable toponymic categories, often resisting linguistic change due to their fundamental importance for settlement, navigation, and regional identity [7]. Their stability makes them invaluable for reconstructing ancient linguistic and cultural landscapes [8].

Cognitive linguistics provides the theoretical lens for this analysis. This framework posits that language is not an autonomous cognitive faculty but is deeply intertwined with overall human experience and cognition. Applied to hydronymy, this means that river names are not merely arbitrary linguistic signs but are motivated by human perception, conceptualization, and cultural experience. The choice of a name reflects what a community perceives as the most salient or meaningful aspect of a river. This interpretative process involves the activation of cultural schemas, semantic frames, and a shared understanding of geographical space [9]. As such, hydronyms serve an important cognitive function by building associative connections between linguistic signs and real-world geographical objects, reflecting culturally shared models of space and identity [10].

A key concept in the cognitive analysis of toponyms is the distinction between procedural and conceptual knowledge [11]. Procedural knowledge involves the simple reproduction of information, such as the name's form and location, which is often based on memorization. Conceptual knowledge, however, relates to a deeper understanding of the name's inner meaning, its symbolic and cultural load, and its connection to regional history [12]. A comprehensive analysis must engage with this conceptual level to uncover the cognitive models underlying the naming process.

Comparative analysis is a powerful tool in toponymy, enabling researchers to identify both universal patterns and culture-specific variations. By comparing the hydronymic systems of different regions, such as Britain and Uzbekistan, we can trace the influence of linguistic substrates (languages spoken before a dominant language was established), settlement histories, and differing environmental pressures [4, 18, 19]. Such studies often analyze place names based on their constituent elements—the "specific" (e.g., 'Mersey') and the "generic" (an implied 'river')—and their etymological motivations [13]. These motivations can be descriptive (referring to a quality of the river), eponymous

(named after a person or deity), associative (linked to nearby flora or activity), or commemorative. The phenomenon of tautological toponyms, such as the "River Avon" (literally "River River"), where a generic term from a later language is added to a name that already means "river" in an older one, provides direct evidence of linguistic layering and cultural succession [14]. Ultimately, this theoretical background equips us to analyze British and Uzbek river names not just as words, but as complex cognitive and cultural constructs.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative, comparative-descriptive methodology to analyze the hydronyms of Great Britain and Uzbekistan. The research is based on a synthesis of existing scholarly work in linguistics, etymology, history, and geography, drawing data from academic publications and specialized databases on toponymy. The core of the method is a thematic comparison of the naming patterns, linguistic origins, and cultural significance of rivers in both regions.

The analytical process consisted of several stages:

1. **Data Collection:** A representative corpus of major and characteristic river names from both Great Britain and Uzbekistan was compiled from the provided source materials. For Britain, this included names of Celtic, pre-Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, and Norse origin (e.g., Thames, Avon, Mersey, Trent) [15]. For Uzbekistan, the focus was on historically significant rivers central to its cultural and economic geography (e.g., Amu Darya, Syr Darya, Zarafshan, Chirchiq) [16].
2. **Etymological Analysis:** Each name was analyzed for its linguistic origins and semantic meaning. This involved tracing the name back to its root words in source languages (e.g., Brittonic Celtic, Old Norse, Persian, Turkic) to understand its literal translation [17].
3. **Cognitive and Cultural Interpretation:** Beyond literal meaning, the analysis applied principles from cognitive linguistics to interpret the naming motivations. Names were categorized based on whether they were descriptive (reflecting physical attributes like color, flow, or geology), mythological (referencing deities or spirits), socio-historical (linked to tribes, cities, or events), or functional (denoting a boundary). This stage aimed to reconstruct the cognitive frame through which ancient peoples perceived and categorized their environment.
4. **Comparative Synthesis:** The findings from the two regions were systematically compared and contrasted across several thematic areas: linguistic stratification, primary naming motivations, the role of mythology and religion, and the function of rivers as socio-political markers. This comparative approach is designed to highlight both universal cognitive tendencies in hydronymy and the unique cultural and historical trajectories that have shaped the hydronymic landscapes of Britain and Uzbekistan.

By integrating etymological facts with a cognitive-linguistic framework, this methodology facilitates a deeper understanding of how river names operate as cultural mirrors, reflecting the enduring legacy of language, belief, and human-environment interaction.

3. Results and Discussion

The hydronyms of Great Britain and Uzbekistan, when viewed through a cognitive-linguistic lens, reveal narratives deeply embedded in their respective landscapes. While both traditions demonstrate a universal human tendency to name features based on observation and cultural importance, the specific content of these names creates a stark contrast, mirroring vastly different histories, environments, and worldviews.

Linguistic Stratigraphy and the Deep Past

A river's name often serves as a geological cross-section of a region's linguistic history. The layers of language preserved in hydronyms tell a story of migration, conquest, and cultural succession.

In Great Britain, the hydronymic landscape is remarkably ancient, with its deepest layer dating to a pre-Celtic, early Indo-European language spoken in the Neolithic period. Rivers like the Severn, Thames, and Humber are believed to derive from this ancient stratum, their exact meanings lost to time, but their forms preserved by successive Celtic speakers. The most dominant layer, however, is Brittonic Celtic. An estimated two-thirds of Britain's rivers bear names of Celtic origin [18]. The most prominent example is Avon, from the Brittonic *abona* ("river"). This has led to numerous tautological names like "River Avon," a cognitive fossil showing how English speakers, not understanding the original meaning, added their own generic term. Similarly, names like Exe, Axe, Esk, and Usk derive from an ancient root for "water" or "fast-flowing". Later linguistic layers are also visible. The Anglo-Saxon influence is seen in names like Mersey, meaning "boundary river," while Old Norse terminology appears in the Lake District, with "becks" (streams) and the Rothay ("red one"). This stratification reveals a history of cultural absorption, where new arrivals adopted existing river names, ensuring their survival for millennia.

In Uzbekistan, the linguistic strata reflect its position as a crossroads of Central Asian civilizations. The primary influences are Persian (Tajik) and Turkic. The Zarafshan River, meaning "spreader of gold" in Persian, points to the long-standing influence of Persian culture and language in the agricultural oases of Samarkand and Bukhara. The two great rivers of the region, the Amu Darya and Syr Darya, carry complex histories in their names. The Syr Darya, known to the ancient Greeks as Jaxartes, is believed to have acquired its modern name from the Turkic 'Shir' tribe that lived along its banks. The Amu Darya, the ancient Oxus, derives its name from the city of Amul and the Persian word 'daryo' for river. These names are not as deeply layered in a prehistoric sense as Britain's, but they are profoundly historical, directly referencing cities, peoples, and economically significant characteristics known to empires from the Achaemenids to the Mongols.

Comparison: Both regions demonstrate how hydronyms preserve linguistic history. However, the British record points to a succession of related European cultures layering upon one another. The Uzbek record reflects the interplay between major, distinct civilizational spheres—the sedentary, agricultural Persian world and the nomadic Turkic world—that defined the history of Central Asia.

Naming Motivations and the Landscape in the Name

The most common cognitive motivation for naming a river is descriptive, capturing a salient physical characteristic. This universal principle manifests in culturally specific ways in Britain and Uzbekistan.

British hydronyms are a rich palette of descriptive detail. Color is a frequent theme: the Thames is thought to mean "dark," the Megget is "whey-colored," and the Lugg is the "bright one". The river's behavior and geology are also common sources for names: the Stour is "fast flowing and powerful," the Trent is the "trespasser," a euphemism for its propensity to flood, and the Calder is the "river of stones". Flora provides another source, with the Dart meaning "river of oaks" and the Iwerne being the "yew-tree stream". These names paint a picture of a temperate, green, and well-watered island, where the nuances of water color and flow were key identifiers.

Uzbek hydronyms, while also descriptive, reflect the priorities of a civilization shaped by an arid environment where water is the ultimate source of wealth. The name Zarafshan ("spreader of gold") is centrally important. While it may refer to alluvial gold deposits, it cognitively frames the river as a bringer of immense value and fertility to the lands it irrigates, turning arid plains into golden fields of wheat. The name Akhangaran

("blacksmiths") is a socio-economic descriptor, linking the river to the primary industry of the people who lived on its banks. The Chirchik's name is tied to its mountain origins, emphasizing its source as a provider of clear, abundant water distinct from the silt-laden rivers of the plains.

Comparison: Both cultures name rivers based on observable traits. However, British names often focus on aesthetic qualities within a water-rich environment (color, sound, speed, surrounding trees). Uzbek names are more frequently tied to economic and life-sustaining properties. The Zarafshan is not just colored, it is "gold," a powerful metaphor for wealth and life in a desert landscape. This difference highlights how the physical environment shapes the cognitive framework of naming.

The River as a Cultural and Mythological Entity

Rivers are often imbued with agency and seen as living entities, a perception reflected in their names.

In Britain, this personification is frequently tied to pre-Christian mythology. Several rivers are named directly after Celtic goddesses. The Severn is linked to the goddess Sabrina, the Boyne in Ireland to Boann ("white cow"), and the Shannon to the goddess Sionann. In Scotland, the Don comes from *Devona* ("goddess") and the Tay from the goddess *Tawa* ("the silent one"). This practice reveals a worldview where rivers were not just geographical features but sacred, powerful beings demanding reverence. Their unpredictable nature—the ability to flood or run dry—was understood as the action of a divine entity.

In Uzbekistan, the reverence for rivers is expressed differently. While the source materials do not point to names derived directly from deities in the same way as in Britain, the rivers are cast as monumental figures in history and culture. The Greek name for the Zarafshan, *Politimet* ("multi-revered"), and the Chinese name *Nami* ("noble, revered") attest to the profound respect this river commanded across cultures. The Amu Darya and Syr Darya are less mythological figures and more historical witnesses, their banks having seen the armies of Alexander the Great and the caravans of the Silk Road. They are conceived as the lifelines of civilization, whose flow dictates the fate of empires. The cultural narratives surrounding them are epic and historical rather than mythological.

Comparison: In both cultures, rivers are far more than water; they are powerful agents. In Britain, this agency is often conceptualized through mythology and personified as deities. In Uzbekistan, this agency is framed through history, casting rivers as the arbiters of civilization and repositories of imperial memory.

The River as a Social and Political Marker

Rivers are natural dividers and connectors, and their names often reflect this crucial social role.

In Britain, this function is frequently captured at a regional scale. The name Mersey explicitly means "boundary river," once separating the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Mercia and Northumbria. The Tweed is thought to mean "border," marking the historic line between England and Scotland. These names reflect the cognitive framing of rivers as tools for organizing political and administrative space on the island.

In Uzbekistan, rivers function as socio-political markers on a grander, civilizational scale. The Amu Darya and Syr Darya did not merely separate kingdoms; they created the very possibility of settled urban life in the vast, arid expanse of Central Asia. They are the defining features of oases that became the seats of great empires. Their names are tied to the people and cities they supported: the Amu Darya named for the city of Amul, the Syr Darya for the Shir tribe [19]. They were the arteries of the Silk Road, connecting East and West. The existence of Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva is predicated on the waters of the Zarafshan and Amu Darya [20].

Comparison: While British rivers are often named as local or national boundaries, Uzbek rivers are framed as the foundational pillars of entire civilizations. Their role as markers is not just about dividing territory but about creating the space where society, culture, and empire could flourish. This reflects the critical difference between the role of rivers in a temperate archipelago versus a continent defined by its arid interior.

4. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of British and Uzbek hydronyms confirms that river names are indeed powerful cultural mirrors, reflecting the divergent historical paths, linguistic ancestries, and environmental realities of these two regions. While united by universal cognitive principles of naming—such as the tendency to describe salient physical features—the content and connotations of these names tell remarkably different stories. British hydronyms serve as an archive of deep time, revealing a linguistic stratiagraphy that extends from a mysterious Neolithic Indo-European tongue through a dominant Celtic layer to later Anglo-Saxon and Norse influences. The names paint a picture of a verdant, water-rich landscape, where subtle differences in color, flow, and surrounding flora were significant, and where rivers were often conceptualized as living deities from a pre-Christian mythological world. Uzbek hydronyms, by contrast, are chronicles of a more recent, yet no less epic, historical past. Forged from Persian and Turkic languages, they speak of the values of a civilization built in an arid landscape, where a river's ability to 'spread gold' was its most vital attribute. These names are interwoven with the history of empires, the Silk Road, and the great cities whose existence depended entirely on the life-giving waters. The reverence they command is not for mythical sprites, but for their role as the arbiters of history and the sustainers of civilization.

Ultimately, the comparison illuminates how culture and environment shape cognition. The British hydronymic mindscape is one of ancient myths, subtle natural beauty, and layered heritage. The Uzbek landscape is one of epic history, economic survival, and the monumental role of water in creating oases of human achievement. The study of these "linguistic fossils" thus provides an invaluable method for accessing the worldviews of those who came before us, demonstrating that in the simple act of naming a river, a culture encodes its deepest values, its most enduring memories, and its fundamental relationship with the world.

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