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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE GENDER CONCEPT IN A FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

JAVADOVA ULKAR YAGUB

Foreign Languages Department,
Azerbaijan University of Architecture and Construction, Baku, Azerbaijan
PhD Candidate of Azerbaijan University of Languages
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5150-8723

ABSTRACT

Figurative language (metaphors, idioms, proverbs, evaluative comparisons, and symbolic images) is one of the most sensitive zones in which a society's gender concept becomes visible. Gender, understood as a socio-cultural construct rather than a purely biological category, is repeatedly encoded in imagery that evaluates women and men, prescribes "appropriate" behavior, and legitimizes power relations through seemingly neutral expressions [1, 2]. This article examines how the gender concept operates in figurative language as (1) a cognitive mechanism that maps abstract social meanings onto concrete bodily and cultural images [3], (2) a discourse mechanism that indexes stereotypes and normative expectations [4, 5], and (3) a pragmatic mechanism that strengthens persuasion and social control in everyday interaction and media. Using a qualitative comparative approach, the study analyzes representative figurative patterns from Azerbaijani, Russian, English, and selected European languages (French, German, Italian), with brief parallels from Turkish context, to demonstrate cross-cultural similarities (e.g., metaphors of strength, purity, danger, leadership) and culturally specific models (e.g., honor/shame frames; family-role symbolism). Brief parallels from Turkish figurative language further support the cross-cultural patterns discussed above. In Turkish, masculinity is frequently conceptualized through metaphors of moral strength and responsibility, as in "Erkek adam sözünün eri olur" ("A real man stands by

his word") or "aslan gibi adam" ("a man like a lion"), which align leadership and authority with strength and reliability.

Femininity, by contrast, is often evaluated through metaphors of modesty, honor, and domestic responsibility, for example "Yuvayı dişi kuş yapar" ("The female bird builds the nest") or "namus kadının süsüdür" ("Honor is a woman's ornament").

These Turkish examples parallel Azerbaijani and Russian data by showing how figurative language encodes gender roles through culturally salient values such as honor, family reputation, and moral restraint, rather than through explicit gender labeling.The discussion integrates conceptual metaphor theory, gender linguistics, and critical discourse perspectives to show that gendered imagery is not decorative: it structures meaning, guides interpretation, and shapes attitudes in communication. The article proposes a classroom- and research-friendly analytical framework for identifying gender metaphors and gendered idioms, with practical implications for language education, translation, and intercultural communication—especially in contexts such as Azerbaijan where multilingual contact intensifies the circulation of global and local figurative models [6].

Keywords: *gender concept; figurative language; metaphor; idioms; proverbs; stereotype; cognitive linguistics; discourse, gender equality*

1. Introduction

The "gender concept" is one of the central cultural concepts through which societies interpret social roles, power relations, and expectations of behavior [1]. In linguistic terms, gender is not only reflected in explicit vocabulary (e.g., mother/father, man/woman) but is also deeply embedded in figurative language—metaphors, idioms, proverbs, evaluative epithets, and symbolic comparisons that circulate in everyday speech and media discourse. Figurative language is a particularly productive research object because it compresses cultural values into memorable images and thus performs an ideological function alongside its expressive function [3, 4].

In many cultures, figurative expressions reproduce stable stereotypes: men are framed through images of power, rational control, and agency, while women are often framed through images of beauty, emotionality, domesticity, fragility, purity, temptation, or danger [5]. This does not mean that all figurative expressions are discriminatory; rather, figurative language offers an empirical space where competing gender models coexist and evolve through cultural change, modernization, and global media influences [7].

For Azerbaijan, the topic has special relevance for three reasons. First, Azerbaijani communicative culture actively uses idioms, proverbs, and honorific metaphors in daily interaction, which makes figurative language socially influential rather than stylistically optional. Second, multilingual contact (Azerbaijani–Russian–English) increases the borrowing and translation of figurative patterns, sometimes importing gender stereotypes and sometimes reshaping them into local frames. Third, contemporary educational and media environments frequently promote "modern" gender messages while simultaneously preserving traditional figurative models—producing a layered and sometimes contradictory system of gender imagery.

The aim of this article is to explain how the gender concept operates in figurative language and to illustrate it with comparative examples from Azerbaijani, Russian, English, French, German, and Italian, with occasional Turkic parallels. The research questions are:

1. Which conceptual metaphors and figurative frames most commonly encode gender meanings?
2. How do gendered idioms and proverbs evaluate women and men differently?
3. What similarities and differences appear across languages, and what do these patterns suggest about cultural values and ideology?

The article contributes a practical analytical framework that can be used by linguists, educators, and translators to identify gender meanings in figurative language and to interpret them responsibly in intercultural contexts [2, 3].

2. Theoretical background

1) Gender as a socio-cultural concept in language.

In modern humanities, gender is widely treated as a socio-cultural category shaped by discourse, institutions, and repeated social performances rather than as a fixed natural essence [1]. Within linguistics, gender research examines how languages represent gender roles, how discourse positions speakers, and how cultural stereotypes are stabilized or challenged through lexical and grammatical choices. In Russian gender linguistics, attention has been directed to the cultural production of gender meanings and the interpretive power of language in social life [8].

2) Figurative language as conceptual structuring.

Conceptual metaphor theory argues that metaphor is not merely a rhetorical ornament: it is a cognitive mapping in which people understand abstract domains (e.g., status, morality, relationships) via more concrete domains (e.g., body, movement, objects, animals) [3]. Gender meanings are often built by such mappings: for example, social "strength" can be conceptualized as physical strength (strong man), and "purity" can be conceptualized as cleanliness (clean reputation), which easily becomes gendered in moral discourse.

A second major perspective is discourse analysis, which highlights metaphor's persuasive and ideological role – especially in public discourse and media [4]. When gender imagery becomes conventional, it can normalize unequal expectations ("men lead, women support") while sounding "natural" because it is expressed through familiar idioms and metaphors [5].

3) Gendered metaphor and phraseology in comparative perspective.

Comparative studies show that languages may share broad metaphor families (e.g., POWER IS UP, CONTROL IS STRENGTH) but differ in culturally salient figurative models and preferred source domains [6]. For example, Russian and English both use animal metaphors to judge behavior, yet their dominant evaluations and the social

acceptability of certain labels differ. A cross-cultural approach helps distinguish universal cognitive patterns from culture-specific ideology [9].

4) **Cross-cultural variation.**

Comparative research demonstrates that languages may share broad metaphor families but differ in culturally salient source domains and preferred evaluative patterns [6]. Therefore, cross-linguistic analysis helps separate (a) general cognitive tendencies from (b) culture-specific ideological meanings [6].

3. Materials and methods

This article follows a qualitative, comparative, and interpretive design. The data consist of representative examples of figurative language (metaphors, idioms, proverbs, evaluative comparisons) collected from:

- widely attested figurative patterns in English and Russian linguistic scholarship [4, 5, 9];
- culturally recognizable Azerbaijani idiomatic and proverbial patterns used in public and everyday discourse (illustrative examples are provided with glosses);
- comparative illustrations from French, German, and Italian, used to highlight shared strategies and culture-specific emphases.

The analytical procedure includes:

1) Identification: locating expressions where gender meanings are implied rather than explicitly named (e.g., “iron lady,” “man of steel,” “weak as a girl”).

2) Metaphor mapping: identifying source domains (BODY, ANIMALS, OBJECTS, WAR, COMMODITIES) and target meanings (POWER, VALUE, MORALITY, SEXUALITY, FAMILY ROLE) [3].

3) Evaluation analysis: coding whether the figurative expression is positive, negative, or ambivalent, and whether evaluation differs depending on the gendered target.

4) Cultural interpretation: explaining how the expression aligns with stereotypes, social norms, or institutional roles [1, 8].

The study emphasizes interpretive clarity and avoids complicated figures. Findings are presented through structured categories and brief example sets.

4. Discussions

1. Dominant gender metaphor families in figurative language.

1.1. POWER/AGENCY metaphors: "strength," "iron," "stone," "steel."

Across many languages, masculinity is conventionally conceptualized through metaphors of hardness and durability that map physical solidity onto leadership, emotional restraint, and authority [3, 5].

English: a man of steel; iron will; strong backbone (POWER/CONTROL → HARD MATERIAL).

Russian: железный характер ("iron character"), стальной ("steel-like")—strength as moral authority [8].

German: imagery of firmness and unbreakability is culturally salient (e.g., the general evaluative contrast between hart "hard/strict" vs. weich "soft/weak" in social judgment), reinforcing the CONTROL → HARDNESS mapping [6].

French: public discourse often praises strong leadership with firmness imagery (ferme, "firm"), while "softness" can be framed as weakness in competitive contexts—again reproducing strength-control links [4].

Italian: leadership rhetoric often blends strength with charisma and visibility, so "strength" metaphors coexist with STATUS/IMAGE frames [6].

A key gender marker is markedness: when women are praised through hardness metaphors, it often appears as exceptional ("strong like a man"), suggesting that masculine-coded strength remains the default cultural association [5].

1.2. VALUE metaphors: women as "treasure" and men as "provider."

A common figurative mechanism assigns women a value through metaphors of precious objects (gem, pearl, flower), while men are evaluated through function metaphors of provision and protection [6]. The evaluative difference is important: object

metaphors can praise women's worth while simultaneously reducing agency—turning a person into an aesthetic possession. This duality explains why compliments may still reproduce inequality when they conceptualize women primarily as objects of display [4].

English: a jewel; a pearl; a flower (VALUE → OBJECT/DECORATION).

French: similar aesthetic objectification appears through conventional praise that foregrounds beauty and refinement, which can be positive but agency-limiting [5].

Italian: metaphors of elegance and charm frequently appear in evaluative language, reinforcing femininity-as-appearance [6].

Azerbaijani (illustrative frame): "Qız evin bəzəyidir" ("A girl is the ornament of the home")—praise through decoration, narrowing social role.

This value asymmetry matters because object metaphors can compliment while simultaneously positioning women as possessions rather than actors [4, 5].

1.3. MORALITY metaphors: purity, cleanliness, "stain," "honor."

Many cultures conceptualize morality via cleanliness (pure/dirty, clean/shameful), and gender intensifies this mapping: women may be more strongly monitored through "purity" metaphors in honor-based discourse, while men may be more strongly monitored through "strength" and "status" metaphors [3].

In Russian and English discourse, moral evaluation often uses "stain" metaphors (пятно на репутации / a stain on one's reputation). In gendered contexts, women's reputations may be framed as more fragile—an asymmetry that reveals cultural expectations rather than linguistic necessity [8].

2. Gendered idioms and proverbs as social instructions.

Idioms and proverbs do not merely describe reality; they function as condensed "social advice," prescribing what women and men should be [4].

2.1. Women and speech: talkativeness and emotional evaluation.

Across languages, stereotypes about women's speech appear as figurative judgments—women are portrayed as excessively talkative, emotionally expressive, or indirect. English popular expressions and jokes frequently frame women's talk as "gossip," while men's talk is framed as "information" or "decision-making." Even when not fully lexicalized as stable idioms, these recurring discourse metaphors shape interaction norms [2].

Russian colloquial patterns also include figurative labels that contrast "serious male talk" with "female chatter," reflecting a cultural hierarchy of communicative styles [8]. The linguistic issue is not that women talk more (a claim debated in sociolinguistics), but that figurative evaluation often treats women's communicative behavior as less legitimate [2].

2.2. Men and emotion: silence as strength.

In many cultures, emotional restraint is positively coded for men. Figurative language supports this by equating silence with strength and self-control (POWER IS CONTROL). The same behavior—silence—may be framed differently for women: silence can be romanticized as modesty or criticized as weakness, depending on context. Such interpretive flexibility shows that gender is not a fixed meaning but a discourse-driven evaluation [1].

3. Animal metaphors and gender: "fox," "lion," "bitch," "cow," "hen."

Animal metaphors are among the most explicit and emotionally charged gender markers in figurative language. They often intensify social judgments because animal images can quickly assign character traits (cunning, aggression, passivity) [6].

3.1. Asymmetry of insult and legitimacy.

A striking cross-linguistic pattern is that animal metaphors for women more frequently target sexuality or moral respectability, whereas animal metaphors for men more often target status, power, or competence [5]. For example, English has gendered animal insults that are socially recognizable; Russian also exhibits gendered animal labeling, where certain terms carry strong moral condemnation when applied to women.

3.2. Why this matters socially.

When a language community normalizes animal metaphors for women's sexuality or morality, it reinforces the idea that women are judged through a narrower moral lens. This is a discourse mechanism that can contribute to social inequality even without explicit discriminatory vocabulary [2, 4].

4. Gender metaphors in public and media discourse.

4.1. The "war/competition" frame and masculine leadership.

Business and political discourse often use metaphors of war and competition (battle, attack, strategy, victory). Research in critical metaphor analysis shows that these frames tend to align leadership with masculine-coded attributes—aggression, domination, conquest—while alternative leadership models (care, cooperation, empathy) can be linguistically marginalized [2, 4]. In English political discourse, leadership and competition are frequently framed through war metaphors such as to fight an election, to launch an attack on opponents, to win the battle for votes, and to defend one's political position. These expressions conceptualize leadership as combat and implicitly privilege attributes such as aggression, decisiveness, and dominance.

In business discourse, similar metaphors appear in expressions like price wars, market battles, strategic attacks on competitors, and defending market share, reinforcing the idea that successful leadership requires confrontation and conquest rather than cooperation.

In Russian media and political language, comparable patterns occur in phrases such as политическая борьба ("political struggle"), экономический фронт ("economic

front"), and атака на конкурентов ("attack on competitors"), which align authority with strength and confrontation.

French public discourse likewise employs expressions such as bataille électorale ("electoral battle"), lutter pour le pouvoir ("to fight for power"), and stratégie offensive ("offensive strategy"), sustaining the metaphor of leadership as warfare.

By contrast, metaphors associated with care, collaboration, or emotional intelligence—for example, leadership as nurturing, listening, or building consensus—appear less frequently and are often framed as secondary or "soft," illustrating how figurative language contributes to the symbolic marginalization of alternative, non-masculine leadership models [2, 4].

4.2. The "family/home" frame and feminine responsibility.

Conversely, women in media are often framed through domestic metaphors: "keeper of the home," "guardian of family values," "the heart of the family." These images can appear respectful, yet they may function as discursive constraints if they limit women's perceived legitimacy in leadership or public authority. Such framing is consistent with the argument that gender is produced through repeated discourse performances [1].

4.3. Global circulation and local adaptation.

Global English discourse spreads figurative labels and meme-like metaphors quickly through social media. Azerbaijan's multilingual media space can adopt and reinterpret these metaphors: some expressions are translated directly; others are localized into culturally meaningful frames (e.g., honor, respectability, family reputation). This supports the idea that metaphor is both cognitive and cultural: universal mappings exist, but each society selects and stabilizes particular images [6, 7].

5. Educational and intercultural implications.

5.1. For language education.

Cross-linguistic comparison: what differs between Russian and European languages?

To extend beyond Russian comparison, the key differences across French, German, and Italian can be described as differences in emphasis:

German tends to strongly value order/structure metaphors in evaluations of competence (control/order imagery), which supports masculine-coded authority norms in institutional contexts. In organizational and political contexts, deviations from this model are often negatively framed through metaphors of chaos or softness, for example unstrukturierte Führung ("unstructured leadership") or weiche Entscheidungen ("soft decisions"), reinforcing a contrast between strength/order and weakness/disorder.

Because these metaphors are culturally associated with rationality, discipline, and emotional restraint, they tend to align institutional authority with masculine-coded leadership norms, while alternative styles emphasizing empathy or flexibility are more easily devalued in figurative evaluation [6].

French discourse often blends authority with rhetorical elegance; evaluative language can emphasize style and social positioning, which creates distinct gendered "respectability" frames [4].

Italian public imagery frequently integrates charisma, appearance, and social performance; femininity metaphors may be especially aestheticized, while masculinity metaphors can combine strength with "public image" [6].

These are not absolute rules; rather, they are tendencies that become visible through the figurative patterns preferred in each discourse tradition [6].

Teachers of English and Russian in Azerbaijan can treat gendered figurative language as an intercultural competence topic: students learn not only vocabulary but also how metaphor encodes values. Classroom discussion of idioms and metaphors can develop critical language awareness—helping learners recognize stereotype-based imagery and choose alternatives when appropriate [10].

5.2. For translation and professional communication.

In translation, gendered metaphors raise two issues: semantic equivalence and social effect. A direct translation may preserve meaning but import unintended sexism;

an adapted translation may preserve the communicative goal while reducing discriminatory evaluation. A structured analysis of metaphor mapping and evaluation helps translators decide responsibly [6].

5.3. A simple analytical checklist (practical model).

To keep analysis classroom- and research-friendly, the following checklist can be applied to any figurative expression:

- Does it imply gender roles even without explicit gender words?
- What is the metaphor source domain (object, animal, body, war, home)?
- Is the evaluation positive/negative, and does it differ for women vs. men?
- What social behavior does it normalize or criticize?
- Does it have a less stereotype-loaded alternative?

6. Conclusions

This article has shown that the gender concept is systematically encoded in figurative language through metaphor families and phraseological patterns that evaluate social roles, normalize expectations, and shape public and private interaction. Across languages, masculinity is frequently framed through metaphors of hardness, agency, and competition, whereas femininity is often framed through metaphors of beauty, morality, domesticity, or sexualized evaluation [3, 5]. Russian and Azerbaijani examples demonstrate that cultural value systems—especially morality, honor, and family reputation—can intensify gender asymmetry in figurative evaluation [8]. At the same time, global discourse and modernization contribute to new hybrid metaphors that may challenge traditional role imagery [7].

From a social science perspective, figurative language is not a neutral stylistic device: it is a cultural technology that organizes perception and legitimizes particular social arrangements [2, 4]. Therefore, systematic analysis of gendered metaphors and idioms is necessary not only for linguistics but also for education, media literacy, intercultural communication, and translation practice. Future research can extend this work by building a balanced corpus (media + spoken interaction + literature) and by

comparing generational differences in the acceptance and reinterpretation of gendered figurative expressions in Azerbaijan.

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