



ETYMOLOGICAL LAYERS OF INCANTATION TERMINOLOGY: THE FUNCTIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF ARABIC-PERSIAN BORROWINGS AND TURKIC ROOTS

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the diachronic and functional stratification of incantation terminology in Uzbek with reference to broader Turkic, Arabic, and Persian sources. While the lexicon of ritual speech in Central Asia is historically multilingual, its components do not overlap randomly: Arabic-Persian borrowings tend to encode doctrinally sanctioned acts, metaphysical categories, and the prestige registers of sacred discourse, whereas Turkic roots more often index vernacular protection, everyday ritual practice, and pragmatic action. Using etymological dictionaries, historical corpora, and close readings of folklore materials, the study traces semantic zones such as supplication, blessing, curse, gaze-aversion, and enchantment, and examines how morphological and phonotactic markers signal register and authority. The findings suggest a stable functional distribution: Arabic items like *duo* (du‘ā’), *sehr* (sihr), and *nazar* co-occur with formalized performatives and learned genres; Persian elements such as *afsāna* and *tilsim* fill narrative and instrumentality niches; Turkic items including *qarg’ish*, *ko’z tegmoq*, *dilek/tilak*, and shamanic titles pattern with local ritual pragmatics. The paper argues that this stratification is reproduced in modern media and pedagogy, shaping how speakers perceive efficacy, legitimacy, and the social indexicality of “magical” speech.

Keywords

incantation, etymology, Uzbek, Turkic, Persian, Arabic, borrowing, ritual speech, curse, blessing, nazar.

Introduction

Incantatory language is an exemplary site for observing how borrowings and native roots settle into complementary functions. In Uzbek and closely related Central Asian varieties, ritual speech draws on Arabic through Islamicate scholarship, on Persian through literary and courtly mediation, and on Turkic through indigenous ritual practice. The result is a layered lexicon in which words differ not only by origin but also by perceived authority, stylistic register, and genre distribution. Previous scholarship has described magic and ritual language in anthropological terms and has analyzed the performativity of blessing and cursing; however, the micro-architecture of etymological layers and their functional allocation in a single language ecology remains under-specified. This study addresses that gap by proposing a principled mapping between etymology and function in the terminology of supplication, curse, enchantment, and gaze-aversion.

The analysis combines three types of data. First, etymological and explanatory dictionaries of Arabic, Persian, Turkic, and Uzbek were used to establish historical origins and earliest attestations. Second, representative textual corpora and collections of folklore and religious

discourse were consulted to identify collocations, genre environments, and pragmatic co-texts. Third, qualitative discourse analysis was applied to ritual narratives, healing formulas, and everyday expressions to trace how lexical choice correlates with perceived efficacy and legitimacy. Methodologically, the study aligns with performative theories of language and with cognitive semantics, while maintaining philological control through dictionary-based etymologies. Examples are transliterated minimally for transparency, and where competing etymologies exist, the argument remains conservative and illustrative rather than exhaustive. Across the semantic field, Arabic–Persian borrowings cluster around doctrinally anchored or literate registers. The Arabic duo (< du‘ā) designates formal supplication framed by religious authority, often occurring with honorifics and Qur’anic citations, and regularly introducing speech acts that claim normative legitimacy. Likewise *sehr* (< siḥr) names “magic” in a theological frame, commonly contrasted with licit supplication and associated with moral valuation. The lexeme *nazar* functions doubly as “gaze” and “evil eye,” enabling formulaic constructions of protection that link the perceived harm to a doctrinal category. Persian contributes complementary elements. *Tilism*/*tilism* (ultimately from Greek *télesma* via Arabic/Persian) marks the object- or device-oriented side of enchantment—amulets, seals, and diagrams—thereby anchoring material culture to ritual semantics. *Afsāna* “tale” does not itself denote incantation but often frames narrative spaces in which magical causation is licensed, and by extension motivates metaphors of “word-power” in literary discourse.

Turkic roots pattern differently. Items such as *qarg’ish* “curse” and the verb *qarg’amoq* provide the everyday mechanics of malediction without appeal to learned authority; they are productive derivationally and integrate smoothly with native aspect and modality. The protective complex around the “evil eye” is expressed in the phraseology *ko’z tegmoq* “the eye touches/affects,” where both constituents are Turkic and the metaphor is kinetic rather than theological. Wishing and intentionality often surface in the Turkic *dilek/tilak* “wish,” whose collocational range includes secular and sacred contexts, suggesting a bridging function between ritual and daily politeness. Titles for ritual specialists in steppe traditions, such as *baxshi*, further index an indigenous performance ecology, in which chant, drum, and healing formula co-occur with Turkic lexis and prosody. These observations support a distribution in which Arabic–Persian items encode orthodoxy, metaphysical categorization, and literate prestige, whereas Turkic roots encode practical ritual handling, local efficacy, and affective proximity.

Morphology and phonotactics reinforce the stratification. Borrowed items often retain recognizable clusters (-sr-, -zr-, emphatics) and foreign plurals or abstract suffixes which help speakers perceive them as formal and authoritative, especially in religious or bureaucratic style. Turkic items exhibit transparent derivation (-moq verbalizer, -ish abstract noun), facilitating on-the-fly coinage of curses or blessings that are indexically intimate. This morphological transparency underwrites the perlocutionary force attributed to spontaneous formulas in interpersonal settings, while the opacity of certain borrowings aligns with the mystique of textual amulets or canonical prayers. Genre environments sharpen the contrast: sermons, written amulets, and courtly literature prefer Arabic–Persian vocabulary, whereas domestic rituals, lullabies, and improvised averting phrases prefer Turkic roots, even when the ritual as a whole is Islamicate.



Pragmatically, speakers exploit the layers to calibrate legitimacy and risk. When efficacy is sought through alignment with divine will, Arabic lexicon such as *duo* is preferred and often paired with Qur'anic citations, creating a performative shield against accusations of illicit magic. When the aim is to hedge against interpersonal envy, Turkic idioms like *ko'z tegmasin* "may the eye not touch" circulate as prophylactic politeness. Cursing displays a similar polarity: Arabicized terms frame moral or legal discourse, while Turkic *qarg'ish* and its derivatives enable controlled transgression in emotionally charged contexts. Persian contributions frequently mediate between these poles by naming instruments (*tilsim*) and narrative frames (*afsāna*), offering a culturally prestigious but less doctrinally loaded vocabulary that suits talismanic craft and literary enchantment.

The distribution persists in modern media. In social networks and televised healing programs, Arabic items index piety and scripturalism, while Turkic formulas are mobilized for intimacy and immediacy; Persian terms retain niche visibility in branding and artifact description. Educational materials similarly replicate the layering by teaching *duo* as a learned category and treating *ko'z tegmoq* as everyday folklore. Rather than converging, the layers appear to stabilize as complementary resources in a shared semiotic economy.

The incantation lexicon in Uzbek and related Central Asian speech communities exhibits robust etymological layering with clear functional differentiation. Arabic borrowings encode performatives tied to scriptural authority; Persian items label instruments and narrative frames; Turkic roots power the pragmatics of everyday protection and malediction. Morphological transparency and phonotactic salience help speakers recognize and deploy these resources appropriately, and genre conventions reproduce the division across sermon, tale, talisman, and household ritual. Understanding this distribution clarifies not only historical contact but also contemporary indexical meanings attached to "magical" speech. Future work should extend the corpus base, add quantitative collocational modeling, and test the distribution across regional and generational varieties to refine the proposed mapping.

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