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LINGUISTIC INTERPRETATION OF PLANT NAMES IN FOLK MEDICINE AND THE SYSTEM OF LANGUAGE

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Annotation: This article explores the linguistic nature of plant names (phytonyms) within the context of folk medicine and their functioning in the broader system of language. Plant names embody not only botanical characteristics but also cultural memory, symbolic meanings, and traditional healing practices accumulated over centuries. By examining etymology, semantics, and motivational features of medicinal plant names, the study reveals how linguistic forms reflect people's perceptions of nature, therapeutic beliefs, and cultural values. The research highlights the role of plant names in shaping linguistic worldview and demonstrates their importance as linguistic units that preserve ethnobotanical knowledge and national identity.

Keywords: folk medicine, phytonyms, plant names, linguistic analysis, etymology, semantics, cultural symbolism, ethnobotany.

Plant names, especially those associated with healing practices, represent a significant layer of linguistic and cultural heritage. In many societies, including Uzbek culture, the naming of medicinal plants is grounded not only in botanical observation but also in traditional healing experience, mythological imagination, and centuries-old folk knowledge. Phytonyms thus operate at the crossroads of language, culture, and medicine. They encode information about the plant's physical appearance, therapeutic properties, application methods, and symbolic associations, forming a complex semiotic system that reinforces cultural continuity and collective memory. In folk medicine, names such as *momio'ona* (literally "mother-healing"), *qayrag'och*, *yalpiz* (mint), *choyshab* (a plant used like tea), and *qizilmiya* (liquorice) reflect intuitive classification processes and highlight the ways in which communities perceive the natural world. The semantic motivation behind many names is transparent: color (*qizilmiya* – "red-root"), shape (*itog'iz* – "dog's mouth"), smell (*mushkuldon* – "musk-scented plant"), or healing effect (*shifobaxsh otabosh* – "healing father-head"). These linguistic choices are not random; they form part of a culturally grounded taxonomy that categorizes plants through features relevant to folk healing knowledge.

From a linguistic perspective, plant names in folk medicine often demonstrate rich etymological layers. Many phytonyms are ancient in origin, borrowed from Persian, Arabic, Turkic, or later from Russian and European languages, reflecting historical interactions and medical exchanges between cultures. For instance, terms like *zarcho'p*, *giyoh*, and *isiriq* have deep etymological roots linked to early medicinal traditions of Central Asia. Their longevity in the language shows how medicinal concepts were preserved through verbal transmission. Semantically, medicinal plant names frequently illustrate metaphorical or metonymic extensions. A plant known for soothing pain may



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bear a name metaphorically associated with comfort or tenderness. Likewise, plants used to ward off evil or illness may be named after protective spirits or symbolic animals, revealing the intertwined nature of language and belief systems. In many cultures, including Uzbek folk tradition, naming practices are intertwined with spiritual healing, creating phytonyms that blend physical and metaphysical meanings.

The linguistic system also reflects scientific evolution. As modern herbal medicine intersects with traditional folk practices, plant names acquire dual layers—one rooted in ethnolinguistic heritage, another influenced by scientific terminology. This coexistence illustrates how language adapts to shifts in knowledge systems while maintaining continuity with cultural roots. Moreover, medicinal plant names contribute to the formation of linguistic worldview (linguistic picture of the world), as they encapsulate how communities conceptualize health, environment, and human interaction with nature. Through them, we can trace social priorities, environmental sensitivity, and the symbolic significance attributed to flora across generations.

Beyond their nominative function, medicinal plant names serve as cognitive tools that help individuals and communities structure knowledge about the environment. In traditional societies, language acts as the primary repository of ecological wisdom, long before written scientific documentation emerged. Consequently, phytonyms become a form of “oral database,” organizing information about which plants cure fever, which relieve digestive discomfort, which are poisonous, or which are used in spiritual purification rituals. For example, the plant *isiriq* is linguistically associated with cleansing and protection in many Central Asian cultures. Its name frequently appears in ritual contexts, which demonstrates how linguistic units reflect not only medical but also ritualistic and symbolic dimensions. This interconnectedness between lexical meaning and cultural practice underscores the significance of contextual analysis in linguistic research.

Furthermore, the study of plant names in folk medicine reveals patterns of linguistic creativity rooted in practical observation. Many names arise from metonymic associations tied to the plant’s environment or function. Terms referring to where the plant grows—near water, in mountains, among rocks—become part of the lexical structure. Similarly, plants used to treat specific ailments may have names linked to those conditions, such as “heart herb,” “sleep grass,” or “blood-washing root,” illustrating a direct mapping between linguistic naming and therapeutic function. These patterns demonstrate the motivational basis of phytonyms, suggesting that early herbalists used intuitive linguistic strategies similar to modern scientific classification, though in culturally specific form.

Comparative analysis also reveals that plant names share cross-cultural similarities. Certain motifs—such as naming plants after animals, colors, or sensory qualities—are observed across many languages, indicating universal cognitive mechanisms in human interaction with nature. Yet each culture also develops unique semantic associations based on local flora, spiritual beliefs, and environmental conditions. In English, for instance, *dandelion* derives from French *dent-de-lion* (“lion’s tooth”), reflecting a metaphor based on leaf shape. Uzbek plant names often rely on similar metaphorical processes but differ in cultural nuance due to the region’s nomadic history, Islamic traditions, and ecological

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diversity. Such comparisons highlight the importance of linguocultural context in understanding how knowledge about healing plants is encoded differently across languages.

Another important aspect is the preservation of endangered linguistic heritage. As modern pharmacology grows and scientific names replace traditional terms, many indigenous phytonyms risk disappearing. These names, however, contain centuries of empirical observations and cultural meanings that cannot be fully translated into scientific Latin. Documenting them is essential not only for linguistic diversity but also for safeguarding traditional medical knowledge that may offer insights for contemporary ethnobotanical research. Linguists and ethnographers note that loss of plant names often signals broader erosion of cultural identity and ecological awareness. Therefore, studying and preserving plant-related vocabulary becomes part of a larger effort to maintain intangible cultural heritage.

In the context of educational and linguistic studies, plant names contribute to understanding how language reflects society's worldview. Their inclusion in dictionaries, folklore collections, and ethnographic studies allows researchers to trace historical shifts in environmental relationships, the introduction of foreign medicinal practices, and changing cultural attitudes toward health. For example, the introduction of new plants through trade routes historically led to lexical borrowings, enriching the vocabulary and signaling intercultural contact. In modern times, globalization continues to influence plant nomenclature, blending traditional and scientific terminology in new and dynamic ways.

Overall, the linguistic interpretation of medicinal plant names demonstrates that they function as bridges between language, culture, and medicinal knowledge. Their etymological roots, semantic structures, and cultural symbolism illuminate how societies conceptualize health and nature. As carriers of collective memory, they ensure continuity between past and present healing traditions. Through detailed linguistic analysis, scholars can better understand not only the structure of plant-related vocabulary but also the broader cultural narratives embedded within these names. Therefore, phytonyms remain an essential field of study for linguists, anthropologists, ethnobotanists, and cultural historians interested in how language captures humanity's relationship with the natural world.

In conclusion, plant names used in folk medicine are not merely nominative labels but culturally and linguistically significant units that preserve ethnobotanical knowledge, reflect communal healing practices, and maintain a symbolic connection between humans and nature. Their semantic richness, etymological depth, and cultural motivation make them valuable objects of linguistic research. By studying phytonyms, scholars gain insight into how traditional societies encode their understanding of medicinal flora and how such knowledge is sustained within the language system. This highlights the importance of plant names as both linguistic artifacts and carriers of cultural identity, demonstrating the intricate relationship between language, culture, and folk healing traditions.



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