




## ARTICLE

# Etymology of Semantically Obscure Words in the Composition of Fixed Expressions

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the etymology of archaic words embedded in Kazakh phraseological units, emphasizing that it is insufficient to analyze only their figurative meanings in modern usage. Many fixed expressions retain lexical elements whose original senses have become obscure, yet these components are crucial for understanding the full semantic and cultural content of the idioms. The research applies the historical-comparative method, drawing on Old Turkic inscriptions, medieval sources, explanatory dictionaries, and comparative data from related Turkic languages. Words such as *jürek* (“heart”), *arqa süieu* (“to rely on the back”), *bauyr* (“liver, kin”), and *tüiemüryndyq* (“camel nose rope”) are examined to uncover their earliest meanings and subsequent semantic developments. The study also includes an empirical component carried out with first-year students of Kazakh philology, who were tasked with interpreting the meanings of obscure words in idioms, consulting historical works, and comparing them with contemporary dictionary definitions. This exercise showed that while some students could successfully identify the literal and figurative meanings, many struggled with words like *tüiemüryndyq*, highlighting the need for etymological awareness in language study. The findings confirm that investigating obscure components of phraseological units reveals not only the lexical evolution of Kazakh but also its broader ethnolinguistic and cultural worldview. Etymological research thus plays a vital role in preserving the national code, deepening the understanding of cultural memory, and ensuring the accurate transmission of idiomatic meanings to future generations.

**Keywords:** Phraseology; Archaic Word; Etymology; Historical-Comparative Method; National Worldview

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# 1. Introduction

In all the languages of the world, the branch of lexicology known as “phraseology” constitutes a vast field that demands comprehensive research, representing an ancient stratum of the language. This group of words contains numerous archaic lexical units, turns of phrase, and cognitive elements closely intertwined with worldview, customs, and traditions, the meanings of which have become obscure over time and are difficult to interpret in the present day. The national worldview reflected in phraseological units is intimately connected with the entire life, perceptions, and ways of apprehending the world characteristic of the Kazakh people.

In this sense, fixed expressions in the Kazakh language are distinguished not by the literal meaning of the individual components, but by the shared meaning they convey as a whole. This shared meaning is not direct but figurative, and figurative meaning typically emerges together with the collective worldview of the people. The process of naming and labeling phenomena in accordance with observed reality can justifiably be regarded as the development of language through thought. By perceiving objects and phenomena in the surrounding world, and by applying existing concepts to them, people assign new meanings. Phraseological units thus form part of the linguistic picture of the world; as an inseparable element of culture, they are the product of collective education and figurative thinking.

To fully understand the figurative thinking of a people, it is necessary to examine each linguistic component within a fixed expression. Therefore, to comprehend the phenomenological meaning and the national worldview encapsulated in phraseological units, it is essential to grasp the meaning of each constituent element—especially those words whose interpretation is challenging. This approach allows uncovering not only the figurative meaning of the expression but also its original literal meaning and imagery. By understanding the significance of obscure words within a phraseological unit, it becomes possible to perceive the people’s intellectual capacity, worldview, and distinctive way of interpreting reality. Without investigating the etymology of such semantically obscure elements, it is impossible to fully comprehend either the nature or the usage of fixed expressions. In other words, if uncovering the nature of a phraseological unit is important, then understanding the meanings of its components and their etymological origins is equally significant.

The next question is how to elucidate the meanings of the words within fixed expressions. While it may be said that phraseology in contemporary Kazakh linguistics has been extensively researched, and that numerous works have recently appeared from an anthropocentric perspective, there remain areas that have been overlooked due to the breadth and complexity of the field. In this regard, Ä. Qaidar notes: “The complexity of phraseologisms lies not only in the variety of their structural types and syntactic models, but also in the thematic and semantic diversity, in their multifaceted nature, and in their exceptional ability to express a wide range of emotional-expressive nuances”<sup>[1]</sup>. A similar view is expressed by N. Uäli: “Although phraseological units have been studied to some extent in Kazakh linguistics, their linguistic-cultural memory and the latent cultural-cognitive meanings they contain have not been sufficiently examined. The current linguistic situation demonstrates that it is no longer sufficient to limit analysis to purely linguistic semantics. This is because the semantic competence of a linguistic subject (whether an individual, a social group, a people, or a nation) is significantly enhanced by the simultaneous possession of both linguistic and cultural-linguistic codes. Linguistic semantics refers to the system of linguistic information corresponding to the definitions found in dictionaries, while cultural semantics encompasses the traditional system of knowledge transmitted from generation to generation through language”<sup>[2]</sup>.

One of the persistent gaps in the study of Kazakh phraseology is the insufficient attention paid to the etymology of words whose meanings have become obscure within fixed expressions. As noted: “Another property of phraseologisms is that they preserve archaic features, ancient forms of words, and their historical characteristics. While the meanings and phonetic shapes of individual words may change, phraseological units remain more ‘faithful’ to tradition in this respect”<sup>[3]</sup>. It is impossible to determine precisely when or by whom such expressions were created, as in this respect they are closely related to the oral literary heritage. Consequently, over time, some words within fixed expressions become unintelligible to modern speakers. Such words cannot be replaced or omitted, yet their meanings can indeed be clarified and explained.

This paper seeks to address precisely this issue: to uncover the meanings of semantically obscure words within

fixed expressions and, through this, to reveal the meaning, function, and distinctive features of the expression as a whole.

Thus, fixed expressions are linguistically complex units both in composition and in meaning. This article will examine the meanings of words within them that are obscure or difficult to understand, thereby shedding light on the nature of fixed expressions in the Kazakh language and their role in revealing the essence of the national identity.

## 2. Research Methodology

To achieve the stated aim, it is crucial to apply, in a well-grounded manner, the methods and techniques employed in the field of etymology. These methodological tools make it possible to identify the earliest form of an archaic lexical item within a given fixed expression, to determine its original meaning, and to reveal its initial usage features. The changes arising from the natural laws of language development differ from those resulting from the influence of contact with other languages. Nevertheless, many issues have been successfully resolved through established etymological research methods. In the current era of globalization, an understanding of our linguistic roots can be achieved through the application of the historical-comparative method and etymological analysis<sup>[4]</sup>.

In determining the origin and initial meaning of a specific word occurring in fixed expressions, the principal method applied in this study is the historical-comparative method. Comparing the item with its equivalents in other languages is a necessary approach for several reasons. First, the comparative-historical method meets the core requirements of etymological inquiry and, in the hands of Turkologist-comparativists, can be employed without restriction to present historical truth through diachronic material and to restore linguistic facts in their original state. Second, due to its universal character, the comparative-historical method often incorporates other approaches. For example, the morphological segmentation of bi- or polysyllabic forms requires reliance on the results of comparative studies of Turkic languages.

On the advantages of this method, Ä. Qaidar observes:

“The historical-comparative method enables etymologist researchers to understand the complex phenomena resulting from language de-

velopment, to identify their manifestations in related languages, and to determine the structural-semantic complexity stemming both from their agglutinative character and their unique historical features. All of this is achieved through the comparison of Turkic languages.”<sup>[1]</sup>

The main distinguishing feature of the comparative-historical method in linguistics is its capacity to determine a word's earliest form, its original meaning, patterns of change, and diffusion routes by comparing related and cognate languages. In Kazakh linguistics, this method has formed the basis of numerous studies. In the present research, works by scholars such as Z.K. Toishubaeva, N.A. Tasilova, M.A. Batyrbaeva<sup>[5]</sup>, Ö.Q. Abdirov<sup>[6]</sup>, A.Q. Meirbekov<sup>[7]</sup>, D.Ä. Baltabai<sup>[8]</sup>, G.S. Akhmetova<sup>[9]</sup>, Q.Q. Kenzhalin, Ä.Q. Tańsyqbaı<sup>[10]</sup>, B.N. Bıarov, K.A. Qusmanova, R.K. Qoilybaeva<sup>[11]</sup>, Zh.A. Bekzhanova<sup>[12]</sup>, A.M. Kartaeva<sup>[13]</sup>, A.Z. Qazanbaeva, Z.N. Zhuymtaeva, M.A. Tursynova<sup>[14]</sup>, G. Sagıdolda, Q.Q. Zhambulova<sup>[15]</sup>, N.A. Shamshen<sup>[16]</sup>, and S.T. Spataeva<sup>[17]</sup> were consulted.

As these studies show, the historical-comparative method seeks the very root of a given word's origin and investigates it comparatively alongside its forms in cognate languages. Three main aspects are considered in determining the origin of a word: phonetic, morphological, and semantic. In addition, the method takes into account the cultural specificity of each person. According to scholars, these three criteria should be supplemented with a historical-cultural dimension in etymology. Ä. Qaidar emphasizes that the criteria are interrelated and must all be considered when resolving etymological problems:

“The criteria are closely interconnected, and each must be taken into account in solving etymological tasks. The completeness and integrity of any etymology are determined by this interplay. For example, the morphological criteria are embedded in the phonetic criteria, and together they help determine the phonological-morphological structure of any lexical unit. Likewise, the semantic criterion is intertwined with the other two. Some scholars, such as O.N. Trubachev, argue that semantics should be the ‘attraction point’ in determining a word's

origin”<sup>[1,18]</sup>.

Etymological research must be based on historical-scientific principles in order to evaluate and interpret historical data accurately. Extralinguistic evidence related to the cultural history of the language—such as ethnonyms, historical records, archaeological and ethnographic materials—is an important factor in conducting etymological reconstruction. Such data often help an etymologist refine their research direction by clarifying the chronology of a term’s representation and conceptual development. Since language is intrinsically tied to the spiritual and material culture of an ethnos, systematic attention to ethnocultural data, the ethnographic context of the language, and the cultural grounding of material is essential in etymological analysis. Historical word-formation models and names for national realia reflect a people’s worldview, historical consciousness, mythological and religious beliefs, and aesthetic-ideological concepts—in short, they encapsulate the accumulated experience of an ethnos in understanding reality.

In summary, four major principles operate in etymological research: semantic, phonetic, morphological, and historical. These principles are most fully realized in the historical-comparative method, which remains the primary avenue for determining the evolutionary patterns of a language, identifying its distinctive features, tracing its earliest forms, and establishing its semantic development. Given that phonetic shifts may also occur due to historical factors, it becomes clear that etymological analysis cannot be confined to a single language or a single principle.

Etymological research is thus a complex process aimed at uncovering the historical, structural, semantic, and cultural foundations of linguistic units. The methodological tools applied in this process are systematically integrated and based on multiple principles. In the present study, the historical-comparative method is applied as the primary approach to uncovering the original form and meaning of semantically obscure words within fixed expressions.

### 3. Results

When seeking the origins of phraseological units and attempting to conduct comparative research with other Turkic languages, one inevitably turns to the Old Turkic Dictionary. This source allows for the analysis of linguistic units

common to all Turkic languages, taking into account their phonetic, lexical, morphological, and semantic changes. In our view, humankind initially created linguistic units by observing changes in itself and by associating these with the parts of the human body.

Among the numerous body-part-based phraseological units found in the Old Turkic Dictionary are several with the word *yürek* (“heart”) as their core. One such unit is *alp yürek*. In Kazakh, the expression *jüdiriqtai jürek* (“a fist-sized heart”) is used to emphasize the heart’s smallness. The expression *alp yürek* has the opposite connotation. While the heart cannot literally be “giant,” a person with a vast spirit, generous nature, or immense kindness is figuratively called “big-hearted” (*alp yürekli*). This linguistic unit reflects the expansive generosity characteristic of the Turkic peoples. It illustrates the worldview in which “the heart reaches where the hand cannot,” expressing a conception of the linguistic picture of the world. However, the first meaning of this phraseological unit in the Old Turkic Dictionary is “hero,” which is understandable given the warlike nature of the era, when bravery, fearlessness, and heroism were valued<sup>[19]</sup>.

The unit *alp qatıy yürekin* conveys an even stronger meaning than *alp yürek*, literally “hard giant heart.” In Uzbek, *alp* is used synonymously with “hero” or “champion”<sup>[20]</sup>. Interestingly, although Uzbek dictionaries provide numerous phraseological units with *yürek*, most have the antonymic sense “cowardly” or “heartless,” rather than the heroic sense. This suggests that in Uzbek, heroism is not linguistically tied to *yürek*; rather, it is expressed by words such as *jasur* and *bahadır*<sup>[20]</sup>, the former of Arabic origin and the latter from Mongolian. In our understanding, however, this heroic meaning tied to *yürek* was present in Old Turkic.

On page 236 of the Old Turkic Dictionary, the phrase *yürek urun* is also found, meaning “to devote oneself entirely, wholeheartedly.” Literally, it translates as “the heart strikes”<sup>[19]</sup>. In addition, in the example under discussion, *yürek* is synonymous with *köñül* (“soul, mind”). The dictionary contains phraseological units combining these two words, such as *köñül yürek*.

Examples from the Old Turkic Dictionary include:

- *köñül açı-* – to long for, to worry;
- *köñül açıl-* – to brighten up, to cheer up;
- *köñül al-* – to take into consideration, to respect;
- *köñül ber-* – to pay attention to, to devote oneself to<sup>[21]</sup>.

Köñül bulıanu (“to feel disgust”) is equivalent to “the heart turns” (jüregi anyu), illustrating synonymy between the two. Here, one is concrete (the physical heart) and the other abstract (the seat of emotions). Similarly, köñül köküz buşuş qatyuya means “to succumb to grief,” where köküz is cognate with kökirek (“chest”). The association is natural, since sorrow, anxiety, and grief are “felt in the heart/chest.” Another example, köñül köni tut- means “to be satisfied, to approve.”

The phrase köñili köterilu carries the meaning “to become haughty,” paralleling the Kazakh expression describing someone whose “shirt is blue, stomach is full” (köyleri kök, köñili toq), leading to arrogance. Köñül qarın ur- means “to devote oneself entirely.” This invites comparison with the Kazakh greeting deni-qarnıñ sau ma? (“Is your body and stomach healthy?”), where qarın (“stomach”) appears to convey the sense of “wholeness” or “completeness,” as in the phraseological unit. In contemporary Kazakh, köñili jaqın (“close at heart”) is still in active use, along with many related expressions indicating kinship and emotional closeness.

Modern Kazakh also retains the synonymy between jürek and köñil, as seen in expressions like jüregi/köñili daualamaý (“lacking the courage”), jüregi/köñili elžireu (“to be touched”), and jüregi/köñili ornyına tüsý (“to calm down”), all supporting the observations made here.

In Kyrgyz, expressions such as er jürek (“brave heart”), jürögündö otu bar (“having fire in the heart”), and jolbors jürek (“tiger-hearted”) parallel Kazakh expressions like jolbarys jürekli and arystan jürekli, comparing courage to the heart of a powerful predator. Alongside these bravery-related somatic phraseological units, both Kyrgyz and Kazakh contain numerous antonymic expressions denoting cowardice or lack of spirit: qoyan jürek (“rabbit heart”), su jürek (“water heart”), tas jürek (“stone heart”), jürek qılın şertu (“to touch the heartstrings”), jürek jutqan (“fearless”), qaskyr jürekli (“wolf-hearted”), jürek jalǵau (“to strengthen oneself with food”), jürek testi/kesti (“to take offense”), jüregi qalmaý (“to lose heart”), jüregi qyžyldau (“heartburn”), jürek syrı (“secret of the heart”), jüregin dert alu (“to be afflicted”), jürekterbeu (“to move one’s heart”), jüregi suýu (“to lose warmth”), jüregi tas töbesine şyǵu (“to be terrified”), jüregine as batpaý (“to be too upset to eat”), jürekke jılı tiu (“to touch warmly”), jüregi şailıǵu (“to be shaken”), jüregi syzdaý (“to ache in the heart”), jüregine tiyu (“to offend”), jüregi

jaralany (“to be heartbroken”), jüregi ornyına tüsý (“to regain composure”), jüregi ot bop janu (“heart burning with passion”), jüregi saz bolu (“to soften”), jüregi soǵu (“heart-beat”), jüregi küpti bolu (“to be uneasy”), jüregi qara (“black-hearted”), jüregi qars airylý (“heart torn apart”), jüregi lüp etu (“to have a sudden emotional reaction”), jüregi qylqu (“to be deeply moved”), jüregine daq tüsü (“to stain the heart”), jüregi daualamaý (“to lack courage”), jüregi elžireu (“to be touched”), jüregi janyu (“heart burning”), jüregi jarılý (“heart bursting”), jüregi anyu (“heart feeling sick”), jüregi alyp-uşu (“to be anxious”), jüregi auzyna tıǵılu (“heart in the mouth”), and jüregi attai tulaý (“heart racing”).

Expressions like qoyan jürek, su jürek, and jüregi joq all carry the sense of “cowardly” or “spineless.” Just as a brave person is exaggerated as “having fire in the heart,” a coward is described as “having no heart at all.” Examples of these phraseological units are given with citations in the Kyrgyz Phraseological Dictionary<sup>[22,23]</sup>, and, as noted earlier, many parallels are also found in I. Kenesbaev’s Kazakh Phraseological Dictionary<sup>[24]</sup>.

A comprehensive analysis of the cognitive and national characteristics of somatic phraseological units in Turkic languages, as well as an examination of the spiritual unity embedded in them on the basis of the traditional worldview and social lifestyle of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz peoples, is a pressing task facing modern linguists.

This raises the question of whether a given linguistic unit in the Old Turkic Dictionary was used in its literal sense or whether it acquired a derived, phraseological meaning. In many cases, phraseological units originally had a literal meaning, which later underwent a semantic shift and acquired figurative usage. For example, in the phraseological unit arqa ber- (“to turn one’s back”), the illustrative example provided in the dictionary shows that, in the first instance, it is not used literally: “If your enemy spurs his horse towards you, do not turn your back” – here, it means “do not flee, stand your ground.” This gives sufficient grounds to classify arqa ber- as a set expression.

Similarly, arqa bermek is etymologically related to the above phraseological unit, meaning “to turn away, to be aloof”<sup>[19]</sup>. In modern Kazakh, the expression arqa süyeý (“to rely on someone’s back”) refers to a person who depends on another’s support – literally “to use someone as a prop.” In the Old Turkic Dictionary, the unit arqa yülek also

carries the meaning “support,” denoting a person who serves as a prop or reliance.

Phraseological units such as *arqa-basy keñý*, *arqasy keñý*, *arqasy bosau*, *arqa eti arsha*, *borbai eti borsha bolu* have survived in contemporary Kazakh, having originated in Old Turkic.

In Old Turkic, the word *bauyr* had several meanings: “liver,” “belly,” “heart,” and “relative.” These meanings not only coexisted but also formed the basis for various phraseological units. In modern Kazakh, expressions such as *bauyr basty*, *bauyrǵa el tarttırmaý*, *bauyrna tartu*, *bauyr eti*, *bauyr jazı*, *bauyr tutu*, *bauyr balqu*, *bauyry бүтин*, *basy esen*, *bauyry qattı*, *bauyrna basu*, *bauyrna kiru*, *bauyrnañ jarau*, *bauyrın jarıp şyqqan*, *bauyrın köteru*, *bauyrın töseu*, *bauyry suýu*, etc., are recorded in I. Kenesbaev’s dictionary<sup>[19]</sup>.

The phraseological unit *bağyr ber-* means “to be kind to one’s relatives.” Since the liver is an internal organ that regulates blood circulation, the polysemy of *bauyr* has its own internal logic. Among its meanings recorded in the dictionary is “belly, stomach.” This is evidenced by the compound *bağyr iş*, as well as *bağyr böşik*, a phrase denoting kinship ties established through marriage (giving one’s daughter in marriage)<sup>[19]</sup>.

In modern Kazakh, the expression *mūryndyq bolu* is in frequent use. In its Old Turkic literal sense, *mūryndyq* referred to a special device placed through a camel’s nose. *Tüemūryndyq* was a thin cord or braided strap with its ends knotted<sup>[19]</sup>. In V.V. Radlov’s dictionary, *mūryndyq* is defined as “a wooden stick placed in a camel’s nose to guide its movement”<sup>[25]</sup>. According to Professor Zh. Mankeeva, “The preservation of this word in modern Kazakh in the phraseological unit *mūryndyq bolu* can be regarded as a figurative meaning arising from ethnocultural associations”<sup>[26]</sup>. Today, *mūryndyq bolu* means “to act as an intermediary, instigator, or catalyst.”

In the Old Turkic Dictionary, Yusuf Balasaguni’s *Kutadgu Bilig* contains a passage where *mūryndyq* conveys the meaning of “stability”: if the vizier does not turn the *mūryndyq* in the wrong direction, all will be well. Here, the word already has a figurative meaning, suggesting that even at that time, *mūryndyq* was involved in the process of forming phraseological units.

In the historical development of the Kazakh language, artistic chronicles on historical themes have played an impor-

tant role. In Abu-l-Ghazi Bahadur’s *Shajara-i Turk*, one finds set expressions absent from modern Kazakh, for example: *Bir-eki yil anda olturyandan soñ anıñ darwazası tört yañya tüşdi*<sup>[27]</sup>. Such phraseological units confirm researchers’ observations that the basis of these expressions was often a concrete object or phenomenon of everyday life. Studying the fixed expressions in the *Shajara*, B. Abilqasimov notes: “From the perspective of the modern language, they can be classified as phraseological units, but given their meanings at the time, they had not yet acquired a figurative sense – the words in the expressions were still used in their primary, literal meaning,” thus their original meanings had not yet been forgotten<sup>[27]</sup>.

In this study, it is also shown that figurative expressions are used in the *Shajara* to describe human character and other qualities: *içi qazandıñ kötünden hām qara’raq* (“blackier than the bottom of a cauldron”); *atı harub, tony tozub* (“his horse is worn out, his coat is tattered”)<sup>[22]</sup>.

Thus, the origins of Kazakh phraseological units can be traced deep into the Old Turkic period. The national worldview embedded in phraseology is closely intertwined with the entire way of life, conceptual understanding, and perception of reality of the Kazakh people. For instance, let us consider the single lexeme *jürek* (“heart”) analyzed above. In Turkic languages, phraseological units based on the word *jürek* serve as a mirror reflecting the people’s worldview, behavioral norms, and spiritual values. From Old Turkic inscriptions to contemporary Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek, this lexeme has been a primary figurative means for expressing both positive qualities—such as bravery, kindness, and generosity—and negative traits—such as cowardice and lack of resolve.

The secondary meanings of a single word have here been analyzed using the historical-comparative method. First of all, in the experiment, 1st-year students of the “Kazakh Philology” program (10 students) within the Lexicology course were asked to explain the meanings of the words and expressions “жүрек” (heart), “мұрындық” (muzzle/halter), “арқа сүйеу” (to rely on), “бағы бар” (fortunate), “түйемұрындық” (camel halter), and “бауыр” (liver/kinsman), based on their own knowledge. Out of 10 students (**Figure 1**):

- 2 students were able to fully explain the meanings of all the given words;

- 5 students could not correctly distinguish the meaning and usage of the word “түйемұрындық”, but correctly identified the meanings of the remaining words;
- 2 students correctly recognized only 3 out of the 6 given words;
- 1 student was able to explain the meanings of only 2 out of the 6 words:

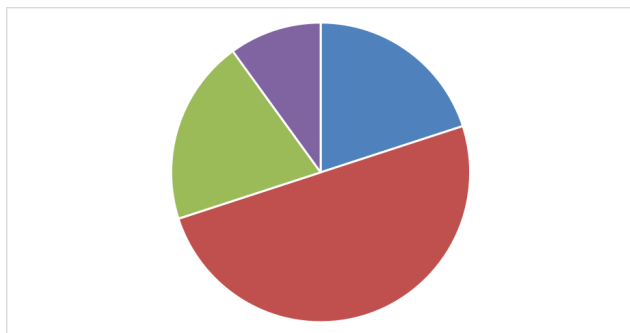


Figure 1. Research Findings.

According to these results, the percentage of students who were able to fully explain the meanings of all 6 words and expressions is 20%. Among the remaining 80%:

- 50% of students did not know the meaning of “түйемұрындық”;
- 20% of students knew only half of the words (3 out of 6);
- 10% knew only 2 out of 6 words.

These results further demonstrate the necessity of knowing the meanings and usage of less frequently used words in the structure of phraseological units today. Therefore, although we could not carry out an etymological analysis for all idioms in the Kazakh language, we made an effort to at least reveal the meanings of those phraseological units that contain obsolete words.

The words to be examined below will likewise be studied according to this principle, with their etymological foundations identified and their obscured meanings clarified.

#### **Abzhylan-dai tolǵandy (“coiled like an abzhylan”).**

In the Phraseological Dictionary, this is defined as “to display menace, to seethe with fury”<sup>[28]</sup>. The Explanatory Dictionary of the Kazakh Language gives the meaning “a large snake”<sup>[29]</sup>. G. Zhärkesheva interprets abzhylan as “water snake,” deriving it from Persian ab “water”<sup>[30]</sup>. The linguist A. Makhmutov, however, sees the first component ab- in the Turkic form ab/ap/äp meaning “poison, magic, the supernat-

ural,” and thus defines abzhylan as “a poisonous, bewitching, magical snake”<sup>[31]</sup>.

First, let us consider the meaning “water snake.” Indeed, very large snakes (for example, the anaconda) often live in water, yet their distribution is limited to South America. The concept of “a giant aquatic snake” is unlikely to have reached the Turanian steppe. Therefore, while we cannot fully dismiss this view (since the Persian ab “water” may still be present), it must for now be set aside.

Second, the evidence for the meaning “poisonous, bewitching, magical snake” is inconsistent. The author appears to conflate the notions of “poisonous snake” and “magical snake.” For this reason, this second etymology also remains hypothetical.

In our view, the semantic interpretation “large snake,” as given in the Explanatory Dictionary of the Kazakh Language, is more convincing. The Old Turkic aba/apa/abu is a kinship term regularly applied to older persons: ata, äke, ağa, apa [grandmother], ana, äpke (“father,” “mother,” “uncle,” “aunt,” etc.)<sup>[32]</sup>. E. V. Sevortyan notes that apa/aba may derive from the root ab/av, a verb meaning “to grow old” [ibid.]. This root ab/ap may well have functioned as an adjective meaning “big, elder.”

Cognates of Turkic aba/apa/abu occur in Altaic-related languages: Mongolic aav “father,” avgai “woman, wife, old woman,” avga “elder, elder brother,” avraga “giant, huge”<sup>[20]</sup>; Tungusic-Manchu ama “father, elder,” Korean abäni “father”<sup>[32]</sup>.

In conclusion, the meaning “large, giant snake” for abzhylan/äbzhylan is the most plausible interpretation.

**Agash atqa mingizdi (“put [someone] on a wooden horse”).** This idiom means “to disgrace, to make the subject of gossip or ridicule”<sup>[28]</sup>. Its history lies in the practice of the Tabghach (Chinese) authorities, who, when rebellious or defeated steppe chieftains were captured, would nail them to a wooden horse as an execution method. This punishment, born of the contemptuous thought “You like to ride horses, don’t you,” was carried out publicly and thus constituted a humiliation for brave and proud nomads. Historical accounts record that two of Chinggis Khan’s ancestors, Ambaqai Khan and Ükin-Burkhan, were executed in this manner during the period of the Jin Dynasty. Over time, this act of public humiliation gave rise to the idiom agash atqa mingizdi. Variants such as agash attıy basyna mingizdi (“put on the head of a

wooden horse”) and *ağash attyñ basyna ilip äketti* (“hung on the head of a wooden horse”) likely arose as hyperbolic forms.

**Adyra qal (“be left deserted”).** This idiom expresses a curse meaning “be left ownerless, be abandoned”<sup>[29]</sup>. The variant *adyram/ädirem qal* means “be orphaned”<sup>[33]</sup>. The Phraseological Dictionary defines *adyra qaldy* as “perished, disappeared forever”<sup>[28]</sup>.

Here, the root *adyra* is traced to Arabic *addara* “to become blind, to lose eyesight”<sup>[34]</sup>, forming the idiom *adyra qal* with the meaning “be left in darkness, be ruined, perish”<sup>[34]</sup>.

**Azhyrǵy bolu (“to be an azhyrǵy”).** The basic meaning of this idiom is “to be a burden to someone, to be unnecessary or superfluous.” It is typically used in the sense “I have become an *azhyrǵy* to you [to your neck].” The noun *azhyrǵy* denotes “a wooden device fastened to the neck of a saddle-sore horse” in order to prevent the animal from reaching and biting at the sore on its back under the pretext of chasing away flies<sup>[29]</sup>. In China, from ancient times, criminals were punished by having a wooden board tied around their neck, and Kazakhs called this device *azhyrǵy*. The etymology of the word is *ajyr/ajyr* “to divide, to separate” + *-ǵy* (nominalising suffix), thus meaning “divider, separator [tool].” It derives from the syncretic root *aj/azh/ash*<sup>[35]</sup>. It became the term for a device that keeps a horse’s head apart from its back, and, since it is an unnecessary, burdensome item placed around the neck of a horse or criminal, it gave rise to the idiom in its present figurative sense.

**Azu tisi balǵaday [pishaqtay] (canine tooth like a hammer [knife]).** This idiom is used to describe someone as “capable, vigorous, strong”<sup>[29]</sup>. While the phrase *azu tis* (“canine tooth”) is generally self-explanatory, it is useful to clarify the etymology of *azu*. Professor G. Doerfer suggests that at the root of *azu* [*tis*] lies the Old Turkic word *az* “to deviate, to go astray, to err”<sup>[32]</sup>. The canine tooth stands apart and is larger than the other teeth, providing a semantic motivation for this link. In Old Turkic, the term appeared in the form *azıg*<sup>[36]</sup>. Thus, *az* “to deviate, to be separate” + *-ıg* (suffix forming nouns and adjectives) produced *azıg*, meaning “separated, distinct,” and used in the sense of “a tooth distinct from the rest.”

**Aidarlysyn qul, tulymdysyn tul etti [qyldy]** (“made the [boy] with a topknot a slave, made the [girl] with temple braids bereft”). This idiom means “to oppress, to enslave,

to humiliate, to subjugate”<sup>[28]</sup>. The Phraseological Dictionary notes that here *aidarly* refers to a male, while *tulymdy* refers to a female [*ibid.*]. Indeed, among Turkic peoples, including the Karakalpaks, it was long customary for men to leave a long lock of hair (*ghulpak* [*aidar* in Kazakh]) at the crown, nape, or both temples<sup>[37]</sup>. The term *ghulpak* does not appear in the Old Turkic Dictionary, suggesting it was used only among certain Turkic groups, or that the Arabic loan *aidar* < *haydar* “a tuft of hair placed on the top of the head”<sup>[29]</sup> had already replaced it early on. For example, in Mahmud al-Kashgari’s dictionary, the word *küzük* is glossed as “forelock [in the Argus dialect]”<sup>[38]</sup>. The Kazakh word *külte* “a tufted bundle of thread, horsehair, hair, etc.”<sup>[29]</sup> is semantically close to these forms.

The Karakalpak scholar D. Aytmuratov notes that *ghulpak/qulpak*, meaning “forelock, braid, tress,” has been preserved in Karakalpak and Turkmen, and suggests that the ethnonym Karakalpak derives from *qara* “black” + *ghulpak* “forelock”<sup>[37]</sup>. As an example, he cites a line from poet Azhiniyaz: *Bende bolyp tüsti ghulpakly uǵlan...* (“The boy with the forelock became a slave...”), which matches the meaning of the Kazakh idiom *aidarly ul*. This supports the idea that the term *ghulpak/qulpak* was later supplanted by *aidar*.

The word *tulym* is most often used with reference to girls: *tulymdy qyz* (“girl with temple braids”), *tulymshaǵy seltegen qyz* (“girl with swinging little braids”)<sup>[29]</sup>. It appears to derive from Old Turkic *tulun* “the right and left parts of a bridle; also items [beads, tassels, amulets, etc.] on either temple”<sup>[38]</sup>. Thus, *tulym* conveys the concept of “hair grown and braided from the two temples.” This raises the question of whether, among the Old Turks, it was customary for girls to braid their hair into two temple plaits and for boys to braid a single plait at the back.

**Ai [äi] deytin aza [äzhe] joq, qoi deytin qoja joq (“There is no elder woman to say ‘hey,’ no elder man to say ‘stop’).** This idiom is used to describe “lawlessness, disorder; a lack of unity or discipline; a community grown up without an authoritative elder”<sup>[28]</sup>. The word *aza* in Old Turkic denoted “a respected elder of the village”<sup>[29]</sup>. In the history of the Turkic languages, the variants *eje/eche/aja/acha/äzhe* occur in kinship terms meaning “grandmother, mother, elder sister, elder brother, father, grandfather”<sup>[32]</sup>. In Tungusic languages, *achi* means “tribal elder,” suggesting that in Turkic as well it may have been used in the sense “tribal head, patriarch”



[ibid.]. Historical sources indicate that the Yenisei Kyrgyz referred to their ruler as ajo<sup>[33]</sup>. The idiom Ai deytin aza joq... thus clearly dates back to an ancient stage of the language, and the variant äi deytin äzhe joq is simply a front-vowel version of the same expression.

**Aiyndy/aiyn shalqar köl (“vast/expansive lake”).**

The Phraseological Dictionary defines this as “a wide, clear, large, glossy lake; a transparent, broad lake”<sup>[28]</sup>. The Explanatory Dictionary gives aiynd as “the surface of a large body of water such as a sea or lake,” and aiynd köl as “a large, expansive lake”<sup>[29]</sup>.

The Concise Etymological Dictionary of the Kazakh Language cites Prof. A. M. Shcherbak, who derives aiynd from ai (“moon”) + tün (“night”) <sup>[31]</sup>. In E. V. Sevortyan’s Etymological Dictionary, aiynd in many Turkic languages means “moonlight, a place lit by the moon, the glittering surface of water”<sup>[32]</sup>. All these interpretations seem to stem from Mahmud al-Kashgari’s gloss of aiydīn as “moonlight”<sup>[38]</sup>, in which the final consonant is given as -ŋ. Based on this, Sevortyan treats aiydīn as a derived word: aiy (verb) + -ŋ (agentive suffix). He also cites J. Clauson’s analysis: ai (“moon”) + d + y + ŋ (suffix of uncertain function)<sup>[32]</sup>.

However, on analysis, the derivation from ai + tün appears to be a case of folk etymology. Even those who regard aiynd/aiydīn as a derived form have not clearly identified the meaning of the formative suffixes. In our view, the word is a compound of ai (“moon”) + dīn. The element dīn/dīn/dy:ŋ/dīn occurs as an independent word in Turkic with the basic meanings “to subside, to rest, to become calm, to settle, to become still”<sup>[32]</sup>. In Chaghatay, dy:ŋ/dīn also preserved the meaning “to refuse, to repel”<sup>[32]</sup>. This latter sense is relevant in aiynd/aiydīn, where it conveys “the reflection or return of moonlight.” Thus, aiynd/aiydīn means “the reflection of the moon’s light” and, since this is most often seen on the surface of water on a moonlit night, it gives rise to the idiom aiynd köl (“a moonlit, gleaming lake”).

**Artında niyazy bar (“[He] has an offering behind [him]”).** This is said in the sense “there is a return or recompense for the blessing given”<sup>[28]</sup>. The word niyaz is a borrowing and does not appear in the Explanatory Dictionary. From Arabic niyāz, it means “alms, sacrifice, votive offering, charitable gift” given for the sake of God<sup>[33]</sup>, and in this idiom, it functions as part of a set expression. The idiom artında niyazy bar thus means “a blessing or prayer has an

associated offering.” The Kazakh proverb Qar jaudy dep quanba, artında ayazy bar; qoja keldi dep quanba, artında niyazy bar (“Do not rejoice at the snow—it has frost behind it; do not rejoice at the arrival of the mullah—he has a required offering behind him”) <sup>[39]</sup> refers to this same cultural practice.

In analyzing the meanings of these words, we relied on an empirical approach. Instead of presenting only the definitions given in the modern explanatory dictionary, we also attempted to trace their usage in Old Turkic inscriptions and historical works. In other words, comprehensive work was carried out with ancient Turkic written monuments.

We emphasized the importance of clarifying the meanings of these phraseological units and the obsolete words within them during the Lexicology course (15 weeks in total), specifically in the 6th week’s lecture. The following results were obtained in that lecture: students realized, based on their initial experience, that it is necessary not only to know the meaning of a single word in isolation but also to uncover its meaning in context; they understood that when obsolete words occur within a phraseological unit, it is important to trace their original meanings in ancient monuments; they identified the meanings and usage features of eight phraseological units presented in the lecture, as well as their original forms and the motivation that led to their figurative meanings.

Most importantly, students learned to work with phraseological units containing obsolete words. The process was as follows: first, they identified a phraseological unit containing an obsolete word; second, they found its meaning in the modern Explanatory Dictionary or Phraseological Dictionary; third, they searched for the obsolete word in ancient sources (the Orkhon–Yenisei inscriptions, the Tonyukuk text, Mahmud al-Kashgari’s dictionary, etc.) and attempted to uncover its meaning. In this regard, in order to accurately reveal the meaning of obsolete words, it is also appropriate to use not only ancient and medieval sources but also the works of scholars from the 19th–20th centuries.

Thus, students did not merely learn the current figurative meanings of phraseological units containing obsolete words, but also engaged in direct exploratory work to reveal the original meanings. In doing so, they recognized unfamiliar words, understood not only the ready-made meanings of the units but also the motivation underlying them, learned to conduct research rather than rely solely on prepared material,

and performed analytical tasks as future researchers.

## 4. Discussion

The data and analyses presented confirm that obscure words embedded in the phraseological heritage of Turkic peoples are closely tied to their historical, cultural, and ethnolinguistic roots. Expressions such as *Aidarlysyn qul*, *tūlymdysyn tūl etti* (“Made the one with the forelock a slave, and the one with the side-lock a widow”), *Ai deytin aza joq* (“There is no elder to say ‘hey’”), *Aiynd shalqar köl* (“A vast, gleaming lake”), *Artında niyazy bar* (“There is an offering behind it”), *Artı kenish* (“His back is a mine of wealth”), and *Arshyn tös* (“A chest like an arshin”) contain lexical elements whose origins trace back to Old Turkic, Persian, Arabic, Mongolic, and even Tungusic-Manchu languages.

In the final seminar session on phraseological units, the 10 students who had participated in the initial experiment became accustomed to conducting independent research. As a result, each student was assigned an exploratory task: to reveal the meaning of a chosen phraseological unit and to explain its significance. Each student selected the phraseological unit individually. Although not all ten students worked directly with the Orkhon–Yenisei inscriptions, the Tonyukuk text, or Mahmud al-Kashgari’s dictionary, they did use the works, translations, and studies of scholars who had researched these monuments.

Among the 10 students (**Figure 2**):

- 32% of the works were evaluated at the 60–70% level;
- 56% were evaluated between 70–80%;
- The remaining 12% received 80–100%.



**Figure 2.** Assessment results of the students.

During the seminar, more than half of the students (56%) correctly understood the task at an average to good level and developed skills for conducting deeper research independently. In other words, the practical task was considered successful. It became evident that students are not yet able to work fully and directly with the ancient inscriptions; therefore, it proved effective to provide them with excerpts and translations from sources such as the Orkhon–Yenisei inscriptions, the Tonyukuk text, and Mahmud al-Kashgari’s dictionary for small-scale analysis.

In most cases, the meanings of these fixed expressions derive from the nomadic way of life, traditional customs, religious concepts, natural phenomena, entertainment, and specific economic practices. Although their present-day meanings are often figurative or obscure, at some point, they were used in a direct, literal sense. Over time, the literal meanings fell out of common usage, and in some cases, the terms survived only as figurative components of idioms, with their original sense forgotten.

The evidence demonstrates that the lexical items in these idioms are not unique to Kazakh but occur in other Turkic languages as culturally significant units. Thus, investigating the archaic and borrowed elements within fixed expressions from an etymological perspective offers valuable insights not only into the history of the language, but also into the subtleties of ethnocultural development. Many of these words are shared across multiple Turkic-speaking peoples, underscoring the common cultural heritage.

Phraseological units serve as one of the principal means of preserving and transmitting a people’s accumulated life experience, worldview, customs, and aesthetic values. For example, the idiom *airan-asyr boldy* (“was astonished, dumbfounded”) has a primary meaning of “to be amazed, astonished” and a secondary meaning of “to be scattered, disordered.” The *airan* component, in fact, derives from the Arabic *ḥayrān* (“astonished”), providing clear evidence of ancient loanwords embedded within phraseology.

Such layers of phraseology have the capacity to transmit the national code either directly or indirectly. Most of these expressions arose from the Kazakh lifestyle, customs, animal husbandry practices, and close interaction with nature. Idioms such as *attıñ jalında*, *tüienıñ qomında* (“on horseback, on the camel’s hump”), *qıruar mal* (“a vast herd”), *qūtpān ayğyrday azınady* (“roared like the sacred stallion”), *Qorqut-*

tin köri (“Korkut’s grave”), qorzhyntin tübi qağyldy (“the bottom of the saddlebag was scraped”), and ängirtayaq oynatty (“brandished a cudgel”) are all deeply rooted in Kazakh conceptualizations of life, nature, and economy.

In some cases, the meaning of a word within a fixed expression is obscure. This may be due to lexical archaism or to etymological opacity, where the original source and meaning have been forgotten. Loan elements, once adapted into Kazakh, can further complicate semantic interpretation. The methods applied in this study demonstrate that by conducting etymological analysis, it is possible to reconstruct the earliest forms and meanings of such words and to clarify their original semantic content.

## 5. Conclusions

The majority of fixed expressions in Kazakh originated long ago, initially used in a direct sense before gradually acquiring abstract or generalized meanings. Today, many are difficult to interpret, not only because the overall idiom’s meaning has shifted, but also because individual lexical components have become semantically opaque. Etymological research allows us to trace these components back to their earliest forms, examine their original functions, and compare them across related languages.

This approach reveals not only the internal laws of language development, but also the extent of semantic change, and how the Kazakh worldview has been encoded—often concentrating multiple meanings into a single word. Conducting such studies on a larger scale enables us to document the evolutionary trajectory of the language and to assess the vitality of idioms across centuries. Through these expressions, we can perceive the wisdom and foresight of the people, their conceptualization of life, and their ability to encapsulate complex cultural realities in concise linguistic form.

In the process of determining the meaning and function of phraseological units, it became clear that working only with their current figurative meanings is insufficient. Therefore, together with 1st-year students of the “Kazakh Philology” program, within the Lexicology course, we sought to identify the original meanings and usages of obsolete words occurring within phraseological units.

As a result, the 10 students who participated in the lectures and seminars did not limit themselves to identifying

only the present, ready-made meanings of the phraseological units. On the contrary:

- They attempted to uncover the meanings of the obsolete words embedded in the units;
- For this, they used historical works, related studies, and various sources;
- They worked on identifying the earliest, most original forms of obsolete words;
- In the seminar sessions, they conducted independent exploratory tasks.

We regard all of these as essential steps in fully understanding the lexical layer of the language. As noted above, accurately and comprehensively identifying the meanings of obsolete words in phraseological units not only reveals the lexical layer of the language but also provides insight into the evolutionary development of the people and the language, while offering significant opportunities to recognize the still unexplored meanings of phraseological units and reintroduce them into usage.

In this research, the passive layers of the language have not only been described, but their diachronic development, etymological evolution, and connection to the national worldview have been systematically examined. Special attention has been given to identifying the historical forms and meanings of words that have undergone phonetic and morphological change and have become semantically obscure. The principal aim of such inquiry is to preserve and transmit the historical memory and cultural code of the language to future generations. Etymological analysis of obscure components within fixed expressions plays a crucial role in deepening our understanding of the national worldview, interpreting valuable literary heritage, ensuring the appropriate use of idioms in accordance with their meanings, and mapping the semantic development of the language.

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Conceptualization, B.M.S. and A.A.A.; methodology, B.M.S.; software, M.Z.S.; validation, B.M.S. and A.A.A.; formal analysis, M.Z.S.; investigation, A.A.A.; resources, M.Z.S.; data curation, M.Z.S.; writing—original draft preparation, B.M.S.; writing—review and editing, A.A.A.; visualization, M.Z.S.; supervision, B.M.S.; project administration, B.M.S.; funding acquisition, A.A.A. All authors have read

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## Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

## Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy restrictions.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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