

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Retronymy As A Systemic Phenomenon in The Dynamic Evolution of Language

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VOLUME: Vol.06 Issue06 2026

PAGE: 23-28

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Abstract

This article investigates the phenomenon of retronymy in contemporary English and Uzbek from cognitive-linguistic and comparative-typological perspectives. The study provides a theoretical analysis of the mechanisms underlying retronym formation, their interrelationship with neologisms, and the influence of information and communication technologies, as well as social and cultural factors, on the lexical system of language. The syntactic, morphological, and discursive manifestations of retronyms are examined in detail. The findings demonstrate that retronymy constitutes a natural and systematic process of lexical development, reflecting the capacity of language to reconstruct its own categories in response to transformations in extralinguistic reality. It is established that retronyms in Uzbek are formed predominantly through free word combinations and relational affixes, distinguishing them typologically from their English counterparts. The study positions retronymy as a significant and promising field of inquiry situated at the intersection of lexicology, cognitive linguistics, and sociolinguistics.

KEYWORDS

Retronym, retronymy, neologism, protonym, neonym, cognitive linguistics, lexical lacuna, linguistic nomination, comparative typology, terminologization, lexical semantics, sociolinguistics, information and communication technologies, free word combination, affixation.

INTRODUCTION

Language, in its continuous function as the primary instrument of human communication, undergoes unceasing transformation at every level of its system. Among all linguistic strata, the lexical layer is unquestionably the most dynamic and mobile, reflecting with particular sensitivity the shifts and developments of the extralinguistic world. The emergence of new material and immaterial objects in society generates a persistent need to rename or reframe existing reality, and it is precisely this need that gives rise to a steady influx of neologisms. Crucially, however, new words do not appear solely to designate previously unnamed concepts; they also arise to differentiate already existing objects and phenomena

from their newly emerged counterparts [1; 79]. The categorial system of the English language — with its rich capacity for attributive compounding and syntactic flexibility — provides especially productive mechanisms for identifying newly emerged objects within the boundaries of existing conceptual categories. It is within this framework that the phenomenon of retronyms in English and Uzbek presents itself as one of the most significant and theoretically illuminating modes of cognitive naming and world perception.

Before proceeding to analysis, it is necessary to establish terminological clarity around the concept of "retronym." In linguistics, this term is employed in two distinct senses. In one

interpretive tradition, it occasionally appears within discussions adjacent to palindromes and reversible linguistic structures [2; 747]. This usage, however, remains marginal in contemporary scholarship. In modern linguistic analysis, the term has acquired a far more precise and productive meaning: a retronym is a name created retrospectively for a previously existing object or concept, necessitated by the appearance of a new variant that renders the original designation insufficiently specific or altogether ambiguous.

The cognitive mechanism underlying retronym formation is one of conceptual displacement. When a new object enters a semantic field, the original object — hitherto unmarked and self-sufficient as a term — loses its definitional exclusivity. The speaker is then compelled to reach backward, so to speak, and attach a qualifying modifier to what was once a perfectly adequate, zero-degree lexical unit.

This process is richly illustrated in Uzbek. When electronic messaging systems proliferated in everyday life, the traditional practice of written correspondence delivered by post — previously referred to simply as *xat* ("letter") — became insufficient to distinguish itself from its digital counterpart. As a result, the retronym *qog'oz xat* ("paper letter") or *pochta xati* ("postal letter") emerged in Uzbek usage, while in English the same cognitive need produced paper mail or physical mail. The protonym *xat*, once an absolute denotatum, was now merely one species within a broader genus.

Similarly, the appearance of touchscreen devices triggered a parallel process of retronymic differentiation. The conventional telephone — once simply *telefon* in Uzbek — required qualification once smartphones entered mass use. The retronyms *tugmali telefon* ("button phone") or *oddiy telefon* ("ordinary phone") emerged to fill this referential gap; English produced feature phone or button phone for the same cognitive purpose.

The phenomenon extends naturally into the domain of technology and media. The traditional camera, once referred to simply as *fotoaparat* in Uzbek, acquired the retronym *plyonkali kamera* ("film camera") once digital photography became the default mode of image capture. The qualifier *plyonkali* ("film-based") was not a feature that required naming when film was the only option; it became necessary only in retrospect, when the emergence of *raqamli kamera* ("digital camera") transformed the original into a marked, differentiated category. English mirrors this process exactly:

what was once simply a "camera" became a "film camera" under identical cognitive pressure.

Likewise, the conventional television set — *televizor* in Uzbek — underwent retronymic modification with the advent of digital broadcasting and smart television platforms. The retronym analog *televizor* ("analog TV") came into being not because the technology had changed, but because the surrounding lexical landscape had shifted irrevocably. In English, analog TV serves the same differentiating function against the backdrop of digital TV and smart TV.

What these examples collectively reveal is that retronym formation is not a peripheral or incidental feature of lexical development, but a systematic and cognitively motivated response to technological and social change. The retronym is, in essence, the linguistic record of innovation: every time a new variant displaces or complicates an existing concept, the original concept acquires a new name — not to describe something new, but to recover the distinctness it has lost.

Here is the expanded translation and elaboration of this section, maintaining full continuity with the preceding text:

The phenomenon of retronymy is perhaps most visibly and productively linked to the rapid advancement of information and communication technologies, which have consistently and irreversibly reshaped the conceptual landscape of modern language. The history of the internet itself offers a compelling illustration. In its earliest phase, there existed only a single form of networked communication, and the word *internet* — or in Uzbek, *internet* — functioned as an unchallenged, unmarked denotatum. No qualifier was needed, because no alternative existed against which it might be contrasted. However, as successive generations of web technology emerged and diversified, the original form required retrospective naming. Terms such as *early internet*, *static web*, or *Web 1.0* entered circulation not to describe something new, but to recover the distinctness of something that had been rendered anonymous by the passage of time and technological progress [3; 359]. In Uzbek, the same cognitive need has produced parallel constructions: *eski internet* ("old internet") or *oddiy internet* ("basic internet") in informal registers, serving the same differentiating function.

The trajectory of the book as a cultural object follows an identical pattern. For centuries, the Uzbek word *kitob* and the English word *book* referred, without ambiguity or qualification,

to a physical object composed of printed pages bound together. The word required no modifier because the concept admitted no rival. The advent of electronic reading devices and digital publishing platforms shattered this referential exclusivity entirely. The original object — unchanged in its physical form — suddenly required a new name to distinguish itself from its digital counterpart. Thus emerged the retronyms *qog'oz kitob* ("paper book") or *bosma kitob* ("printed book") in Uzbek, and printed book or physical book in English. The protonym *kitob* had not changed; the world around it had.

This dynamic — in which technological proliferation forces the retroactive renaming of previously unmarked concepts — is now a defining feature of contemporary lexical development. It is worth emphasizing that retronyms are not merely descriptive labels; they are cognitive artifacts, encoding within their structure the entire history of a conceptual disruption. Every retronym carries, implicitly, the memory of a moment when a single concept fractured into two, and language was called upon to restore the distinction that innovation had dissolved.

The present era of technological acceleration and the globalization of educational systems has given rise to a particularly dense and rapid proliferation of new terms across multiple domains of the English language — and, increasingly, of Uzbek as well, given the latter's intensive engagement with global scientific and educational discourse. Terms, as distinct from ordinary lexical innovations, are typically created consciously and deliberately, with the intention of filling a precisely identified conceptual gap. This intentionality makes them objects of special interest for linguistic research [4; 112]. Scholars representing a wide range of theoretical schools have investigated the processes of terminology formation and neologization, and the findings of such research consistently illuminate the deeper regularities governing the evolution of the lexical system.

The object of the present study is the phenomenon of retronymy itself, while its subject is the manifestation of retronyms in contemporary English and Uzbek, with particular attention to their emergence and function within the domain of education. The methodological apparatus employed throughout the investigation includes lexicographic source analysis, comparative examination of theoretical literature, definitional analysis, observational classification, and descriptive-analytical methods.

The analysis confirms that retronyms arise with particular intensity and frequency at precisely those moments when new technologies, systems, or organizational practices enter a field and displace or complicate an existing concept. The educational domain is especially rich in such formations, as the digital transformation of learning has generated an entire constellation of retronymic oppositions. Several characteristic patterns may be identified:

The first and most pervasive pattern involves the opposition between analog and digital devices. In Uzbek, *oddiy kamera* ("ordinary camera") or *plyonkali kamera* ("film camera") emerged directly as a consequence of *raqamli kamera* ("digital camera") entering mass use. In English, film camera, analog recorder, and landline telephone all follow the same structural and cognitive logic: a previously unmarked term acquires a qualifying modifier that identifies it retrospectively as the original, non-digital form of a bifurcated category.

The second pattern concerns the opposition between traditional and remote or online modes of instruction. In Uzbek, *an'anaviy ta'lim* ("traditional education") and *auditoriya darsi* ("classroom lesson") have emerged as retronyms in direct response to the proliferation of *masofaviy ta'lim* ("distance education") and *onlayn dars* ("online lesson"). What was once simply *ta'lim* — education, unmarked and self-sufficient — has been reframed as one pole of a binary distinction that did not exist a generation ago. English mirrors this development precisely: face-to-face teaching, in-person learning, and traditional classroom instruction are all retronyms born of the same cognitive necessity.

The third pattern involves the distinction between voice calls transmitted over conventional telephone networks and those conducted via internet-based platforms. In Uzbek, *oddiy qo'ng'iroq* ("ordinary call") or *telefon qo'ng'irog'i* ("telephone call") in its traditional sense now requires implicit or explicit differentiation from *internet qo'ng'irog'i* ("internet call") or *video qo'ng'iroq* ("video call"). In English, landline call or regular call serves the same function, distinguishing the historically prior form from its technologically newer rival.

The fourth pattern encompasses the broad domain of document management and record-keeping. In Uzbek, *qog'oz hujjat* ("paper document") or *bosma nusxa* ("printed copy") has emerged as a retronym distinguishing physical documentation from its electronic counterpart, *elektron hujjat*. In English, paper document, hard copy, and physical record

all represent the same retronymic response to digitization. What is particularly noteworthy here is the pragmatic dimension: in many professional and bureaucratic contexts, specifying that a document is a qog'oz hujjat carries not merely a descriptive but a normative connotation — implying officiality, permanence, and legal validity in ways that the electronic form has not yet fully supplanted.

Taken together, these patterns reveal that retronym formation in both English and Uzbek is not a random or marginal process, but a structurally coherent and cognitively motivated response to the ongoing transformation of material and social reality. The retronym is, in the deepest sense, the lexical conscience of technological change — the mechanism by which language insists on preserving the memory of what existed before, even as it reaches forward to accommodate what has newly arrived.

Here is the expanded translation and elaboration of this section:

The opposition between face-to-face and virtual interaction represents one of the most socially consequential domains of retronym formation in contemporary language. What was once simply uchrashuv in Uzbek — a meeting, unmarked and unqualified — has been fractured by the emergence of video conferencing platforms into two distinct conceptual categories. The retronym yuzma-yuz uchrashuv ("face-to-face meeting") or jonli uchrashuv ("live meeting") now stands in explicit opposition to virtual uchrashuv ("virtual meeting") or onlayn uchrashuv ("online meeting"). In English, the same bifurcation has produced in-person meeting, face-to-face meeting, and physical meeting — all retronyms that would have been entirely superfluous, and indeed incomprehensible, to a speaker of a generation prior.

This pattern of retronymic opposition extends across a remarkably wide range of everyday concepts, each of which has undergone the same fundamental cognitive transformation: a previously singular, unmarked category has been divided by technological innovation into two distinct referential poles, with the original requiring retrospective naming to recover its specificity.

The conventional photograph — once simply rasm or surat in Uzbek — became oddiy fotosurat or bosma rasm ("printed photo") once digital imaging rendered physical prints a marked, differentiated category rather than the self-evident

default. In English, print photo or physical photograph serves the identical function. The handwritten letter, qo'lda yozilgan xat in Uzbek, acquired its qualifier only after electronic messaging transformed xat into an ambiguous hypernym encompassing both physical and digital correspondence; English produced handwritten letter and physical letter under the same pressure. The desktop computer — stol kompyuteri in Uzbek — was simply kompyuter until the proliferation of laptops and tablet devices made the qualifier stol ("desk") necessary to specify the stationary form. The live lesson, jonli dars, emerged as a retronym in Uzbek educational discourse precisely because yozib olingan video dars ("recorded video lesson") had entered the field and stripped the word dars of its former unambiguity. And the conventional board game or physical game — oddiy o'yin — now requires differentiation from mobil o'yin ("mobile game") and onlayn o'yin ("online game") in a way that would have seemed entirely unnecessary before the digital entertainment industry reshaped the semantic boundaries of the concept of play.

The development of information technologies exerts a profound and multidirectional influence on the semantic system of language, setting in motion a cluster of interrelated processes that collectively reshape the lexical architecture of a language from within.

The first of these processes is the specialization and generalization of words. Terms that once covered a broad, undifferentiated semantic field narrow in meaning as sub-categories emerge and acquire their own designations — while simultaneously, other terms broaden into hypernyms that encompass newly related concepts. The Uzbek word aloqa ("communication" / "connection"), for instance, has expanded dramatically in semantic scope with the emergence of digital communication platforms, while simultaneously generating a range of more specialized derivatives.

The second process is terminologization and de-terminologization — the migration of words between specialized and general usage. Technical terms coined within professional or scientific discourse filter into everyday language through media exposure and widespread adoption, while conversely, some previously technical terms lose their specialist connotations as they become domesticated within general vocabulary. Onlayn, server, and fayl are examples of terms that have undergone precisely this trajectory in Uzbek.

The third process is the appearance of new words alongside

the reactivation of older ones. Technological change does not only generate entirely new lexical units; it also breathes new life into dormant or peripheral terms by giving them renewed relevance. The Uzbek word *qo'lyozma* ("manuscript" / "handwritten text"), for example, has acquired a new pragmatic charge in the digital age — now functioning, in certain contexts, almost as a retronym in its own right, implying deliberate, artisanal opposition to digital text production.

The fourth process is the broadening and narrowing of lexical meanings. The English word *classroom*, to take a particularly instructive example, underwent a decisive semantic narrowing once virtual classroom entered educational discourse. What had been a self-sufficient, unmarked term became the marked member of a binary pair, obliged to specify itself as physical classroom in order to be unambiguous. In Uzbek, *sinf xonasi* ("classroom") has followed an identical trajectory. Similarly, the English word *meeting* — once adequate to describe any organized gathering — now requires specification as in-person meeting in professional and institutional contexts where the virtual alternative is understood to be equally available. The unmarked form has become the marked form; the general has been forced to become the particular.

Retronyms are formed through several distinct linguistic mechanisms, of which adjectival modification is by far the most productive. The attachment of a qualifying adjective to an existing base noun is the primary structural pattern through which language responds to the cognitive pressure of retronymic differentiation. In English, traditional education stands in explicit opposition to online and modern instructional formats; offline activity distinguishes embodied, non-networked engagement from internet-dependent participation; manual work marks the human-executed form of labor against the backdrop of automated and algorithmic processes; and classic version differentiates the original form of a product or system from its updated successors. In Uzbek, the same adjectival mechanism produces *an'anaviy ta'lim*, *oflayn faoliyat*, *qo'l mehnati*, and *klassik versiya* — structurally parallel formations serving identical cognitive functions.

What is particularly significant from a typological standpoint is that in Uzbek, the adjectival modifier in such constructions tends to carry a stronger connotative weight than its English counterpart. The Uzbek qualifier *an'anaviy* ("traditional") does not merely differentiate; it simultaneously invokes a set of

cultural associations — reliability, continuity, human warmth — that the neutral English traditional does not always carry with the same force. This pragmatic asymmetry between formally parallel retronyms in the two languages is itself a productive subject for cross-linguistic investigation.

Beyond individual lexical units, retronymic meaning can also be encoded at the level of entire utterances and discourse constructions. Certain phrases and sentences acquire a retronymic character in context — that is, they presuppose, without explicitly stating, the existence of a newer alternative against which the older form is being defined. In Uzbek, the utterance "*Men sizga oddiy telefon orqali qo'ng'iroq qilaman*" — "I will call you on an ordinary telephone" — would have been semantically redundant before internet-based calling became widespread; the word *oddiy* ("ordinary") became necessary precisely because the emergence of internet *qo'ng'iroq'i* had rendered the unqualified verb *qo'ng'iroq qilmoq* ("to call") ambiguous as to medium. Similarly, the instruction "*Faylni qog'ozga chiqarib bering*" — "Please print the file onto paper" — is a construction that presupposes and implicitly contrasts with the electronic alternative; the specification *qog'ozga* ("onto paper") was once redundant and is now semantically essential. And the phrase "*Darsga shaxsan keling*" — "Please come to the lesson in person" — is a communicative formulation that would have been entirely unremarkable before the emergence of distance education, and which now functions as a clear retronymic signal, marking physical attendance as the non-default, explicitly specified option.

It is essential to recognize, finally, that retronym formation is driven not only by technological advancement but by the full range of social, cultural, and ideological transformations that reshape the categories through which a community perceives and organizes reality. Changes in family structures and social organization, for instance, have generated retronyms in the domain of kinship and domestic life. The emergence of diverse family configurations in contemporary societies has produced terms such as traditional family and nuclear family in English — retronyms that would have been conceptually redundant in an era when these configurations were the unmarked, self-evident norm. The qualifier traditional in traditional family does not describe a new object; it recovers the identity of an existing one that has been rendered indistinct by the proliferation of alternatives. In Uzbek, *an'anaviy oila*

("traditional family") has acquired a similar retronymic function in contemporary social discourse, carrying both a descriptive and a normative charge that reflects the cultural tensions surrounding changing domestic structures.

This broader observation underscores a fundamental theoretical point: the retronym is not merely a linguistic phenomenon, but a sociolinguistic one. It is the point at which lexical change and social change intersect — the precise location in language where the history of a community's evolving relationship with its own reality becomes visible.

The processes of globalization and technological advancement exert a direct and continuous influence on lexical development, and English — as the primary instrument of international communication — reflects this pressure with particular intensity. Retronyms are an inseparable part of this dynamic: they arise wherever a newly emerged concept renders an existing designation ambiguous, compelling speakers to recover the distinctness of what was once unmarked. The analysis confirms that neologisms and retronyms are not competing phenomena but parallel and mutually constitutive processes — every successful neologism implicitly marks its predecessor as the old, and in doing so, generates the cognitive conditions for retronym formation.

Retronymy thus represents a natural and inevitable stage in the life of any living language, testifying not to linguistic confusion but to linguistic resilience. In Uzbek specifically, the phenomenon manifests through structurally distinctive patterns — a preference for free word combinations, productive relational suffixation, and qualifiers carrying strong cultural connotations — that diverge meaningfully from English and merit dedicated comparative investigation.

Although retronymy as a theoretical category remains incompletely studied, particularly within Uzbek linguistics, the present research demonstrates its significance as both a cognitive and a sociolinguistic phenomenon. It stands at the intersection of lexicology, cognitive science, and the sociology of language — a mechanism through which language continuously reconstructs its own categories in response to the world it is called upon to name. Future research might extend this investigation through corpus-based analysis, cross-Turkic comparison, and deeper sociolinguistic inquiry into the cultural values encoded within retronymic choice.

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