

ZOONYMS IN MODERN LINGUISTICS: TERMINOLOGICAL, CULTURAL, AND SEMANTIC ASPECTS

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Abstract. *In modern linguistics, various terms are used to designate animal names, such as animal names, zoological lexicon, zoonyms, and animalisms. However, the most common and widely accepted term remains zoonym, which is used in both narrow and broad senses. In the narrow sense, zoonym refers to proper names of animals (nicknames), while in the broad sense, it denotes common nouns referring to animals. This article explores the semantic and cultural diversity of zoonyms across Russian, Uzbek, and English languages, emphasizing their metaphorical, evaluative, and symbolic functions within phraseological and cultural systems.*

Keywords: *zoonym, zoo-lexeme, zoonymic phraseology, metaphor, cultural symbolism, linguistic worldview, Uzbek, Russian, English.*

In contemporary linguistics, several terms are employed to denote animal names, including animal names, zoological lexicon, zoonyms, and animalisms. Nevertheless, the term zoonym remains the most prevalent in scientific discourse, used in both narrow and broad meanings.

In its narrow sense, the term refers to proper names of animals such as Murzik, Buryonka, Sharik, etc. [Mokienko, 1976; Urasin, 1976].

In its broad sense, zoonyms are understood as common nouns denoting animals (e.g., cat, cow, dog, etc.) [Litvin, 1983]. Despite the widespread use of the term, researchers have repeatedly noted a certain semantic ambiguity and terminological inconsistency, which may be considered its drawback.

The first monographic study of Russian zoonyms based on Chinese material was conducted by Zheng Yingkui (2002), who pointed out that the term zoonym is “excessively categorical,” as it implies that every word necessarily denotes a concrete animal. Meanwhile, a number of lexical units may be connected not only with denotations of the animal world but also with other realities. Moreover, a zoonym may function either as a primary lexical-semantic variant of a polysemantic word or as one of its derived meanings.

To refine the terminology, Zheng introduced a distinction between zoo-lexeme and zoonym-containing lexeme. According to his definition, a zoo-lexeme is a lexical unit whose primary meaning is associated with a specific animal (e.g., elephant). If such a word is monosemous and fixed in explanatory dictionaries without additional meanings, it

simultaneously acts as a zoonym (e.g., bullfinch). Conversely, when the name of an animal is used metaphorically, it is considered a zoonym-containing lexeme (e.g., flycatcher – “a small bird”) [Zheng, 2002, p. 35].

In this study, the terms zoonym and zoo-lexeme are used to refer to animal names, while the notions zoomorphism, zoomorphic image, and animalistic image are applied to metaphorical, evaluative, and figurative meanings of zoo-lexemes, including their phraseological uses.

Despite cultural differences among nations, many languages reveal a tendency toward anthropomorphic interpretation of animals—humans tend to liken animals to themselves and vice versa. This allows one to describe human qualities expressively through animal imagery.

Phraseological units containing zoonymic components convey various characteristics of a person, including:

- Physical traits: strong as a horse, sharp-eyed as a lynx, smell like a dog, agile as a monkey;
- Appearance: fat as a boar, with a goat’s beard;
- Psychological traits: as angry as a dog, as stubborn as a bull;
- Intellectual features: as stupid as a sheep, staring like a cow at a new gate;
- Behavioral traits: repeat like a parrot, sly as a fox, chatter like magpies.

Such zoomorphisms have long entered everyday speech, enriching it with expressiveness and evaluative nuances. Scholars note that even when referring to the same animal, the semantics of zoomorphisms may vary significantly across languages—sometimes symbolizing opposite qualities depending on cultural traditions. This indicates that zoomorphisms reflect the national-cultural specificity of linguistic consciousness.

The meanings of zoomorphisms are determined not so much by the real properties of animals as by the cultural characteristics attributed to them in collective consciousness. Thus, cultural interpretation becomes the key factor in the formation of their semantics.

Based on the similarities and differences in animal perception across languages, three main groups of zoonymic phraseological units can be identified:

1. Universal units, conveying similar meanings across languages (e.g., biblical or Latin-origin idioms).
2. Equivalent thematic units, expressing similar ideas through different animal images (e.g., laziness, fantasy, deceit).
3. Culturally specific units, reflecting unique meanings tied to national traditions.

Furthermore, Halliday and Hasan (1976) emphasized that lexical cohesion in discourse often relies on metaphorical repetition of animal imagery, while Hymes (1972) viewed such phenomena as part of communicative competence, demonstrating the cultural embeddedness of linguistic behavior.

Russian linguistic tradition, starting from the works of Vinogradov, Mokienko, and Telia, pays special attention to phraseological units with zoonymic components.

Expressions such as “трудится как лошадь”, “голоден как волк”, “хитрый как лиса” demonstrate that animal metaphors encode moral and behavioral traits recognizable in collective consciousness.

Litvin (1983) analyzed zoonymic polysemy, emphasizing that such expressions form a “semantic field of anthropomorphism.” Mokienko (1976) highlighted that Slavic zoonymic phraseology reflects both folklore and moral evaluation — thus functioning as a “moral lexicon” of the nation.

In Uzbek linguistics, the term zoonym refers to words designating animals as living beings (e.g., tulki “fox,” dundoq “owl”) as well as metaphorically used names describing people, their appearance, character, or behavior.

From a linguocultural perspective, zoonyms often possess symbolic and connotative meanings: the animal serves not only as an object of nomination but also as an image, metaphor, and symbol reflecting folk worldview, mythology, and religion. Researchers note that zoonyms carry linguocultural information and are closely connected with Uzbek traditions and folklore.

In modern Uzbek linguistics, zoonyms are viewed as elements of the lexical system, phraseology, and invective vocabulary. They often perform metaphorical functions describing human qualities. For example, in Latipov’s study “Invective zoonymic vocabulary of Russian and Uzbek languages” (2023), it is shown that zoonyms are actively used in colloquial and pejorative contexts, where animal names gain negative connotations.

Moreover, many animals native to the Uzbek cultural and natural environment serve as symbols: bars (leopard), shunqar (falcon), and shaqol (jackal) represent strength, agility, courage, or cunning. These images frequently occur in folklore, proverbs, and literary works.

In English, zoonyms encompass both real animal names (dog, cat, horse, fox, pig, sheep, donkey, wolf, snake, lion, monkey, etc.) and their metaphorical meanings denoting human traits, behavior, or social roles.

Animals in English culture are often associated with specific human qualities:

- Dog – loyalty and friendship (faithful dog, loyal companion).
- Cat – independence, grace, and slyness (curiosity killed the cat, a catty remark).
- Lion – bravery and nobility (as brave as a lion, the Lionheart).
- Fox – cunning and agility (a sly fox).
- Wolf – dual symbolism: loneliness or ruthlessness (lone wolf, wolfish smile).
- Pig – greed or dirtiness (to eat like a pig, dirty pig).
- Sheep – submissiveness (black sheep, a sheepish smile).
- Horse – strength and diligence (strong as a horse, workhorse).
- Monkey – playfulness and mischief (monkey business, cheeky monkey).

Thus, English zoonymic phraseology demonstrates a close connection between linguistic form and cultural meaning, performing nominative, cognitive, evaluative, and symbolic functions.

Zoonymic vocabulary constitutes a unique layer of linguistic and cultural expression. It reveals the intricate interrelation between human perception of animals and cultural worldviews. Comparative analysis of Russian, Uzbek, and English data shows that while universal tendencies exist in zoonymic semantics, each culture shapes distinct symbolic and emotional associations. Consequently, zoonyms serve not only as linguistic units but also as cultural codes that preserve collective experience and national identity.

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