ZOOMORPHIC IDIOMS IN UZBEK, RUSSIAN, AND ENGLISH: ANIMAL IMAGERY AND CULTURAL VALUES

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Abstract. *Animals are among the oldest and most expressive sources of figurative language, and idioms that compare people to animals reveal how a culture judges character and behavior. This article compares zoomorphic idioms — set expressions built on animal imagery — in Uzbek, Russian, and English, three languages shaped by different environments and beliefs. Working within the Great Chain of Being model of Lakoff and Turner and the cultural approach of Kövecses, and drawing on the phraseological traditions of Kunin, Telia, and Mokienko, the study asks which animal symbols are shared across the three languages and which are bound to a particular fauna, economy, or folklore. The analysis shows that a core of animal symbols is broadly shared — the fox for cunning, the wolf for greed, the snake for treachery — because these animals and their salient traits are common to all three cultures. Beyond this core the imagery diverges: the bear is central to Russian and marginal elsewhere, the camel and the horse carry weight in Uzbek that they lack in English, and the same animal may be valued differently from one culture to the next. The article concludes that zoomorphic idioms encode a shared folk model of nature overlaid with local ecology and belief, and that their translation depends on whether the animal’s cultural value travels with its name.*

Key words: *zoomorphic idioms, animal metaphor, phraseology, Great Chain of Being, cognitive linguistics, linguoculturology, cultural values, cross-cultural comparison*

Introduction.

Comparing a person to an animal is one of the oldest moves in figurative language, and every culture keeps a stock of zoomorphic idioms in which animals stand for human traits. Lakoff and Turner (1989) explained this through the Great Chain of Being, a folk model that ranks forms of life and lets animal qualities be read as human ones. Kövecses (2010) added that which traits a culture highlights is itself culturally shaped. In the phraseological tradition, Vinogradov (1977), Kunin (1996), Telia (1996), and Mokienko (1989) described how animal images become fixed expressions carrying evaluative meaning, and Talebinejad and Dastjerdi (2005) showed in a cross-cultural study that animal metaphors are partly universal and partly culture-specific. Uzbek, Russian, and English,

however, are rarely compared. The present study compares their zoomorphic idioms to determine which animal symbols the three languages share and which belong to a single ecology and folklore.

Research methods.

This study is qualitative and comparative. Its material consists of zoomorphic idioms of Uzbek, Russian, and English drawn from published phraseological dictionaries, including Kunin (1996) for English and Rahmatullaev (1978) for Uzbek, organized by the animal on which each is built. Each idiom was paired with its counterparts in the other two languages and analyzed, within the Great Chain of Being framework (Lakoff & Turner, 1989), to identify the human trait mapped onto the animal and to determine whether that mapping is shared across the three languages or specific to one, using comparative and contextual analysis.

Results and Discussion.

The zoomorphic idioms fall into a shared core and a divergent periphery, as Figure 1 shows. Where an animal and its most salient trait are familiar to all three cultures, the idioms align; where the animal or its cultural role is local, they part.

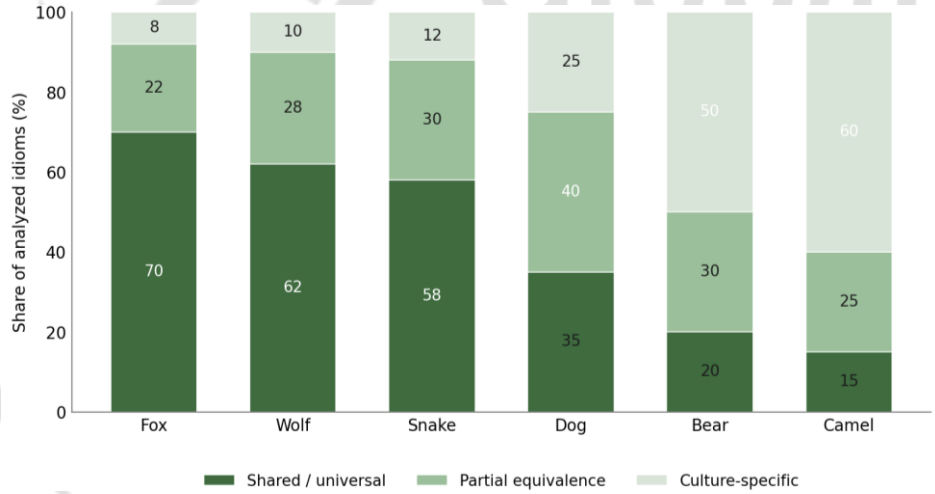

Figure 1. Cross-linguistic consistency of animal symbolism.

A core of animal symbols is common to Uzbek, Russian, and English (Table 1). The fox is cunning, the wolf greedy and dangerous, the snake treacherous, and the donkey foolish or stubborn in all three.

Trait	Uzbek	Russian	English
cunning	tulkidek ayyor (‘cunning as a fox’)	хитрый как лиса (‘cunning as a fox’)	sly as a fox
greed / hunger	bo’ridek och (‘hungry as a wolf’)	голодный как волк (‘hungry as a wolf’)	hungry as a wolf
treachery	ilondek (‘snake-like’)	змея подколодная (‘a snake in the grass’)	a snake in the grass
stubbornness	eshakdek qaysar (‘stubborn as a donkey’)	упрямый как осёл (‘stubborn as a donkey’)	stubborn as a mule

Table 1. Animals with shared symbolism.

These mappings are stable because the animals are equally familiar and their salient behavior equally visible, which is what the Great Chain of Being predicts: the same natural trait is read into human character across cultures (Lakoff & Turner, 1989). Such idioms are usually full or close equivalents and travel well in translation.

Beyond this core the imagery diverges with ecology and folklore (Table 2).

Animal	Uzbek	Russian	English
bear	—	медвежья услуга (‘a bear’s favor’, a harmful kindness)	(no idiom)
camel	tuyadek sabrli (‘patient as a camel’)	—	(no idiom)
dog	it hayoti (‘a hard life’)	собачья жизнь (‘a dog’s life’)	man’s best friend (positive)
owl	—	—	as wise as an owl

Table 2. Animals with culture-specific or divergent symbolism.

The bear, the master animal of Russian folk tales, stands for clumsy strength and gives Russian a dense set of idioms with no Uzbek or English match; the camel and the horse, central to Central Asian pastoral life, carry Uzbek meanings of patience and endurance that English renders only by paraphrase. Even shared animals may be valued differently: the dog names a hard or contemptible life in Russian and Uzbek, yet is loyal and positive in English; the owl is wise in English but not a fixed symbol in the other two.

Taken together, the zoomorphic idioms describe a layered system. Beneath them lies a shared folk model of nature, common to the three cultures, that assigns fixed traits to widely known animals; over it lies a local layer determined by which animals a people lives among and how its folklore casts them. The shared layer makes many animal idioms translatable as equivalents; the local layer produces the gaps, where an animal’s cultural value does not travel with its name, as Telia (1996), Maslova (2001), Mokienko (1989), and Talebinejad and Dastjerdi (2005) each observe from their own material. Dobrovol’skij and Piirainen (2005) would classify the first layer as cross-linguistically shared and the second as culturally marked. For the translator the rule is easy to state and hard to apply: render the animal when its symbolism is shared, and replace or explain it when the symbolism is local.

Conclusion.

Zoomorphic idioms rest on a folk model of nature that the three cultures largely share. Because the fox, the wolf, the snake, and the donkey are familiar everywhere and their salient traits plain to see, the symbols built on them — cunning, greed, treachery, stubbornness — recur across Uzbek, Russian, and English, and the corresponding idioms translate as equivalents. To this common ground each culture adds a local layer, drawn from the animals it lives among and the stories it tells about them: the bear of the Russian forest, the camel and the horse of the Central Asian steppe, the differing fortunes of the dog.

The result is that animal idioms are translatable exactly as far as the animal’s cultural value is shared. Where the symbolism is common, the image can be carried over; where it is local, the translator must substitute a native animal or abandon the image for a paraphrase. The distance between two cultures’ animal idioms is thus a measure of the distance between their landscapes and their folklore. These conclusions, based on dictionary material, would be strengthened by corpus evidence and by widening the comparison to further languages.

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