

STUDY OF THE VOCABULARY AND STYLISTIC FEATURES OF ZOONYMIC EXPRESSIONS

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Abstract:

Zoonymic expressions—words and phrases that derive from or involve the names of animals (zoonyms)—play a significant role in human language, functioning both lexically and stylistically. This paper explores the vocabulary of zoonymic expressions and their stylistic features, focusing on their metaphorical usage, cultural symbolism, and communicative functions in both everyday and literary discourse. The study also examines the cognitive and linguistic mechanisms behind the use of zoonyms in idiomatic expressions, proverbs, and slang, offering insight into the anthropocentric worldview reflected in language.

Keywords: Zoonymic expressions, animal metaphor, figurative language, Idioms, stylistic devices, anthropocentrism, conceptual metaphor, cognitive linguistics, cultural symbolism, lexical meaning.

1. Introduction

Language is a mirror of human cognition and culture, and one of its most vivid reflections lies in the use of animal names—zoonyms—to describe human behavior, social roles, emotions, and moral values. Zoonymic expressions are ubiquitous in most languages, revealing how humans project their observations and interpretations of animal behavior onto themselves. From calling a cunning person a “fox” to likening stubbornness to a “mule,” the use of zoonyms enhances expression, intensifies emotional impact, and enriches communication. This article investigates the vocabulary involved in zoonymic expressions and their stylistic and pragmatic roles in language use.

2. Vocabulary of Zoonymic Expressions

Zoonymic vocabulary includes a wide array of expressions rooted in animal names. These can be single-word metaphors (e.g., “snake” for a treacherous person), similes (“as busy as a bee”), idioms (“to cry wolf”), and proverbial phrases (“don’t count your chickens before they hatch”). The underlying vocabulary often draws from culturally salient animals, which carry symbolic or stereotypical traits.

- Commonly Used Zoonymic Lexemes: These often include domesticated and widely known animals such as dog, cat, pig, horse, fox, chicken, and bear. For example:
- Dog: loyal (positive), aggressive or degraded (negative, e.g., “a dog’s life”)

- Cat: sly, feminine, independent
- Pig: gluttonous, dirty
- Fox: cunning, sly

Cultural Variability: While some zoonymic meanings are nearly universal (e.g., the fox as cunning), others are culture-bound. For instance, in English, “lion” symbolizes courage and nobility, but in some African cultures, the hyena may represent wisdom rather than deceit, contrary to Western views.

Gender and Social Stereotyping: Many zoonymic expressions reveal gendered and social biases. Women are often referred to as “chicks,” “bitches,” or “vixens,” which carry varying degrees of connotation from playful to derogatory. Men may be labeled as “bulls” or “stags,” implying strength or virility.

3. Stylistic Features and Functions

Zoonymic expressions are not only lexical units but also serve rich stylistic purposes in both oral and written communication. Their effectiveness lies in their vivid imagery and associative potential.

Metaphor and Simile: These are the primary stylistic tools. Saying someone is a “rat” immediately evokes betrayal and cowardice. Similes such as “as sly as a fox” use zoonyms to draw direct analogies that are culturally intelligible and emotionally charged.

Irony and Sarcasm: Zoonymic expressions can be used ironically. Calling a cowardly person a “lion” functions as sarcasm, inverting the expected trait.

Hyperbole and Exaggeration: Some zoonymic terms amplify traits for comic or dramatic effect—e.g., “eating like a horse” exaggerates a person’s appetite.

Alliteration and Phonetic Play: Expressions like “mad as a March hare” or “proud as a peacock” use rhythmic and phonetic appeal, enhancing memorability and stylistic value.

Symbolism and Allegory: In literature, authors often use animals allegorically. George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* uses zoonyms to symbolize political classes and ideologies. In fables, animals act out human traits, making moral and social commentary accessible through symbolism.

4. Cognitive and Linguistic Perspectives

From a cognitive linguistics viewpoint, zoonymic expressions reflect conceptual metaphors and anthropocentrism. According to Lakoff and Johnson’s theory of conceptual metaphor, people understand abstract domains (e.g., morality, intelligence) through concrete ones (e.g., animal behavior). Thus, “snakelike” describes deceit through the sensory and cultural understanding of snakes.

Anthropocentrism: Language centers on human experience, but zoonyms allow projection of human traits onto animals and back. This dual movement reflects both human fascination with animals and the use of animals as mirrors of ourselves.

Frame Theory: Understanding a zoonymic phrase like “to chicken out” requires activating a mental frame of what a “chicken” typically does—timidity and fleeing. These frames are culturally encoded and learned early.

Pragmatic Functions: Zoonymic expressions can serve as euphemisms (e.g., “he’s a bit of a bear” instead of “he’s antisocial”), insults (“ass,” “cow”), or humor devices. They can mitigate or intensify communication depending on context.

5. Use in Literature and Media

Writers, journalists, and speakers use zoonymic expressions to convey tone, satire, or character traits efficiently. In Dickens’ works, characters like Mr. Squeers (from *Nicholas Nickleby*) or Mr. Bumble (from *Oliver Twist*) may exhibit animalistic traits even if not named after animals, while others are described in zoonymic terms (e.g., “dogged determination”).

In modern media, headlines often use zoonymic wordplay (“Political Lions Roar in Debate”), while cartoons and satire rely heavily on anthropomorphized animals for social critique.

Conclusion

Zoonymic expressions are a rich intersection of vocabulary, culture, cognition, and style. They reflect how language users interpret the natural world and apply it to human behavior, often with emotional, moral, or humorous overtones. Understanding these expressions provides insights into societal values, cognitive metaphors, and stylistic creativity. As language evolves, zoonymic expressions continue to adapt, reinforcing their position as dynamic elements in human communication.

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