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THE ROLE OF ZOOMORPHIC PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS IN REPRESENTING GENDER

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates phraseological units with gender semantics. Specifically, it analyzes the gender semantics in English phraseological units containing zoomorphic components from structural-semantic, social, and linguocultural perspectives.

KEYWORDS

Phraseological unit, metagender, masculinity, femininity, zoomorphism, reference, connotation.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary humanities, gender is defined as a sociocultural sex, which involves the attribution of specific qualities and behavioral norms to an individual based on their biological sex. While gender is not considered a linguistic category, its essence can be revealed through the analysis of linguistic structures. The investigation of gender categories using linguistic devices is the primary objective of linguistic gender studies, a multifaceted field of research.

Research on language and gender is diverse, primarily focusing on two main areas:

1. Language and Gender Expression: This encompasses describing and explaining how the existence of different sexes is expressed through language. This includes how men and women are evaluated and in which semantic fields these evaluations are most clearly and distinctly expressed.
2. Gender-Specific Communication Patterns: This area focuses on identifying typical strategies and tactics employed by men and women. It explores gendered lexical choices, effective communication techniques, and preferences in lexical and syntactic structures,

highlighting the distinctive features of male and female speech.

Gender concepts are among the most significant cultural concepts because they exist in every culture and play a crucial role in shaping linguistic personality and interpersonal communication. Gender concepts find their expression through language; therefore, their meaning and structure can be described by analyzing their objectification through linguistic devices. The aggregate of linguistic tools expressing a concept at any stage of social development is defined as the concept's nominative field. A significant part of the nominative field of gender concepts includes the naming of individuals of different genders, including zoomorphic imagery. Zoomorphisms not only allow for the description of a person's appearance, behavioral characteristics, physical, intellectual, and moral qualities, and emotional state, but also incorporate a distinct evaluative tone and cultural connotation.

Lexical units expressing gender concepts are defined as gender marked. Their semantics include gender-related information, i.e., the potential to activate gender stereotypes and representations in the minds of communicants and to impose restrictions on the use of these units in relation to male or female referents [4]. In describing lexical units with gender semantics, they can be divided into three groups: metagender, and units with masculine and feminine referents. Developing a methodology for studying these units is one of the key issues in contemporary linguistic gender studies.

“The analysis above demonstrates the crucial role of considering national and cultural specifics in identifying the characteristics of phraseological units, revealing the semantic field of each individual

phraseological unit. A complex application of linguocultural, contrastive, and cognitive approaches provides a comprehensive understanding of the linguistic phraseological system” [3].

As noted by A.A. Kipriyanova and T. Ogdanova [5], the functional-semantic group of zoomorphisms is defined as a series of zoonyms, performing characterizing and expressive functions. Enriched with emotional and instrumental meanings, zoomorphisms are widely used in everyday speech and literature. Zoomorphic imagery carries distinct connotations. Their purpose is to attribute specific traits to a person, consistently or almost consistently, carrying an evaluative meaning, since transferring animal characteristics to a human implies evaluative connotations.

METHODOLOGY

The symbolic meanings of zoonyms arise from a creative understanding of the world (particularly the fauna), and these meanings are shaped based on both universal and national conceptions of animals. While similar animal names are often recognized for their characteristic functions across different cultures, the meaning of zoomorphisms in one language can differ from the meaning of similar zoomorphisms in another one.

In English, the image of a “magpie” is used to describe a person who hoards many unnecessary things. Thus, while the human cognitive ability to associate people with animals is common across all languages, zoomorphisms can reflect not only universal but also nationally specific associations. In this research, in addition to differences in associative links between a particular animal and speakers of a language, we will examine how the national specificity of zoomorphisms

may manifest in differences in the gender reference of these lexical units (i.e., their ability to be associated with a person of a particular gender), as well as in the use (or non-use) of animal names alongside male and female gender terms.

Following a review of the key characteristics of zoomorphisms using lexicographic sources, a corpus of units was compiled for further analysis. The selected material, consisting of English zoomorphisms for this analysis, comprised 57 units: ape, ass, bear, beast, beave, bitch, bird, bull, calf, cat, chick, cock, coot, cow, crow, cur, dog, donkey, dotterel, dove, duck, eagle, fish, fox, gander, goat, goose, hare, hawk, hen, hog, horse, lamb, jay, lion, lioness, magpie, monkey, mouse, mule, parrot, peacock, pig, pigeon, rabbit, rat, rook, serpent, sheep, skunk, snake, swine, tiger, tigress, vulture, wolf, woodcock.

In these examples, 12 units form dichotomous pairs: bull - cow, goose - gander, hen - cock, lion - lioness, snake - serpent, tiger - tigress. The remaining lexemes (except beast, bird, calf, chick, cur, fish, hog, lamb) are specific names of fauna representatives.

Using lexicographic data, the gender reference for each unit was determined. The gender reference of zoomorphisms was identified based on the presence of a specific lexeme repertoire in dictionary definitions. For example, lion – a person possessing strength or courage. In phraseological units, this can be exemplified by:

every dog is a lion at home – (used in reference to people who are more assertive and free in their own home than in public);

Dog – a person who has done something unpleasant, disgusting, or bad; mostly refers to men.

it is a poor dog that does not know ‘come out’ – (used in reference to people who don't know when to stop);

Wolf – encompasses meanings of strong, not very intelligent, greedy. Mostly used in pejorative contexts.

a wolf in sheep's clothing – (used in reference to people who appear kind and gentle but are actually malicious).

To simplify the description during the research, zoomorphisms were divided into semantic groups. Analysis of zoomorphisms according to their semantic group revealed that the most frequently used images in the English material are those expressing character traits, moral qualities, and intellectual abilities.

Analysis of the collected English material concerning all semantic groups revealed a predominance of zoomorphisms with negative connotations. Various linguists [6] have noted the prevalence of negative evaluations over positive ones. As R. Lakoff points out, this relates to the human characteristic of conceptualizing reality, where “good” is considered the norm and not always explicitly mentioned, while 'bad' is marked and frequently reflected in language as a deviation from the ideal “good” [2].

The research identified zoomorphisms without direct equivalents for figurative naming of humans. The following animal names possess national specificity in English: beaver, coot, cur, dotterel, duck, jay, mule, rook, skunk, vulture, woodcock. Of these images, only coot, cur, mule, skunk, and vulture were found in the English samples, but their usage in the examined contexts was relatively infrequent.

RESULTS

The research revealed the following results. In expressing gender concepts in English culture, a number of zoomorphisms are used similarly to other linguistic cultures; that is, they contain similar associations, their gender references correspond, and they differ in the frequency of use in objectifying masculinity/femininity. Universality was observed in the use of the following zoonyms: rat; ape, monkey; pig, swine; hawk; lamb; fish; and calf (although for fish and calf, despite semantic and referential correspondence, infrequent use in the examined contexts was observed).

Thus, the process of naming animals to distinguish their gender in English is relatively complex, and when using animal names to describe a person, the associations linked to the animal are more important than the animal's sex. This may explain the absence of male and female counterparts for the indicated zoomorphisms.

In English, besides the trope gander used for men, the trope goose is also used to describe a person and serves as a common generic name. Interestingly, when depicting people, the zoomorphism goose can be associated with both men and women:

Cassandra Murnieks, a cricket fan, led the charge to have Ponting sacked: 'Ponting is a goose and he has stuffed up so many chances for Oz now,' she wrote on her Facebook page (The Times, 24.08.2009)

Hitler's half-sister, Angela, for example, reportedly once called Eva Braun 'a silly goose' (The Guardian, 21.08.2006)

Regarding the snake/serpent pair, there is asymmetry in gender reference concerning male/female counterparts. As the research shows, in English

materials, both counterparts (the female-associated lexeme 'snake' and the male-associated 'serpent' possess metagender references and have the ability to express both masculinity and femininity: She told Jennifer that Helene thought her a snake. Loucinda had won round Helene... and now- as Helen's face of thunder implied ~ she was a treacherous bag (The Times, 24.04.2008).

And his attempt to take over Harley Davidson failed after a case in which the judge described him as a "snake in sheep's clothing" (The Guardian, 14.12.2004).

"Your conduct has converted me into a very serpent", she proclaims (Times Literary Supplement, 31.10.2008).

Jason Braham thought of Mr MacPherson as a treacherous serpent (The Sunday Times, 06.07.2008).

In the zoonym cow, despite the gender reference being consistent across many languages (both zoomorphisms objectify femininity), the English counterpart has a broader meaning: an unpleasant, unattractive, uninteresting woman:

"What for?" she asked, looking miserable. She always looks miserable, poor cow (The Guardian, 22.12.2007).

A noticeable difference in meaning is observed in the zoonym hen. In English culture, the zoomorphism hen describes a woman by age, associating her with a fussy, elderly woman:

This month I shall feel a bit like an old hen myself, because all three of my children are coming home from various foreign parts... (The Times, 07.07.2007).

The zoomorphism tigress carried a negative meaning (dangerous, aggressive woman) in all examined contexts. According to lexicographic data, in English



culture, the image tigress is associated with a courageous, energetic woman, but also often excessively aggressive and ruthless. However, in some instances, it was used solely with positive connotations, as in the following example:

...his wife could have made Ivan the Terrible quake in his boots. A tigress when it came to pursuing career appointments both for her husband and their eldest son, her steely courage served her best when she was fighting for the survival of her family (The Guardian, 21.03.2009).

CONCLUSION

“Men and women perceive and evaluate existence differently. The gender variable in speech communication manifests itself at various linguistic levels: phonetic, lexical, grammatical, and semantic. Gender relations are not only used in an encoded form but also give rise to the thematic content and characteristics of the speech event” [1].

Furthermore, the study of current zoomorphism usage in English linguistic culture revealed a predominance of units with metagender reference, which can represent both masculinity and femininity in different contexts, regardless of the animal's sex. This leads to the conclusion that it is not the sex of the animal but rather the associations it evokes that determine to which human gender the zoonym is attributed. The decisive factor here is likely the associations a particular animal triggers.

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