

SEMANTIC FEATURES AND LEXICAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF ARABIC PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS CONTAINING ANIMAL NAMES

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Abstract

This study examines the semantic properties and lexical constructions of Arabic phraseological units containing animal names (zonymic phraseologisms). These units constitute one of the richest layers of language, reflecting national-cultural characteristics, ecological realities, and historical experience. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Vinogradov (1977), Kunin (1984), Telia (1996), Maslova (2001), Lakoff and Johnson (1980), and Wierzbicka (1992), the research explores the figurative nature, metaphorical foundations, and connotative meanings of zonymic phraseological units, as well as their role in representing human behavior, social relations, and moral values. The study also analyzes the primary lexical-syntactic models of such units, including comparative constructions (af'al al-tafdīl), simile structures (tashbīh), genitive constructions (idāfa), verbal phrases, and proverbs. The findings demonstrate that zonymic phraseology in Arabic encodes cultural knowledge and cognitive models, functioning as a key component of expressive and evaluative discourse.

Keywords

zonymic phraseology; Arabic language; semantics; metaphor; connotation; lexical structure; comparative construction; cultural linguistics; cognitive metaphor.

INTRODUCTION

In modern linguistics, phraseology represents an important field for investigating the national and cultural characteristics of language (Vinogradov, 1977:23; Kunin, 1984:11). Phraseological units containing animal names zonymic phraseologisms are particularly significant, as they reflect a community's worldview, cultural experience, and cognitive patterns (Wierzbicka, 1992:19; Maslova, 2001:34). In Arabic, zonymic phraseology occupies a special position due to its deep connection with Bedouin life, desert ecology, and Islamic cultural traditions. These phraseological units describe human character, behavior, and

social relations through attributes associated with animals, whether real or metaphorically constructed (Zamakhshari, n.d.; Baranov, 1969).

The sources of these expressions include classical Arabic literature, poetry, Quranic texts, Hadith, and oral folklore traditions. The semantic and structural analysis of zoonymic phraseological units contributes not only to linguistic research but also to linguocultural and cognitive studies (Telia, 1996:84; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:4). The aim of the research is to identify the semantic features and lexical constructions of Arabic zoonymic phraseological units and to analyze their figurative and connotative nature.



METHODS AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This study employs lexical-semantic analysis, componential analysis, and cognitive-metaphorical analysis. The corpus of examples is drawn from classical Arabic phraseological sources principally al-Zamakhshari's "Al-Mustaqsa fi Amthal al-Arab" (n.d.) and Baranov's "Arabic-Russian Dictionary" (1969) supplemented by examples from Quranic discourse and contemporary Arabic usage. The analysis proceeds from the classification of zoonymic units by semantic category, through the examination of structural types, to the identification of cognitive and cultural functions.

Zoonymic phraseological units are stable expressions that include the names of animals, birds, insects, or fish. In Arabic linguistics, such expressions are often studied within the framework of al-Amthal wa al-Hikam (proverbs and wisdom literature). Their primary function is to describe human qualities and social conditions through animal characteristics (Zamakhshari, n.d.; Kunin, 1984:23). From a linguistic perspective, phraseological units are stable expressions whose meanings cannot be fully derived from the meanings of their individual components; in Arabic, these units are highly expressive and culturally loaded (Ammosova, 1963:14; Vinogradov, 1977:31). Animal names in Arabic phraseology perform several important functions: they reflect the ecological and cultural environment (e.g., desert life and pastoral traditions); they evaluate human behavior and personality; and they convey moral and didactic meanings (Maslova, 2001:41; Beregovskaya, 2004:67).

RESULTS

Semantic classification: imagery and metaphorization. Arabic zoonymic phraseological units can be classified semantically into two principal categories (Telia, 1996:112; Beregovskaya, 2004:69).

Expressions describing human character draw on the most culturally prominent animals of the Arab world. The camel () symbolizes endurance and patience:  ("More patient than a camel") denotes extreme

patience. The lion (الأسد) symbolizes courage and strength: "Braver than a lion". The fox (الثعلب) symbolizes cunning: "More cunning than a fox".

Expressions reflecting social conditions draw on scriptural and ecological knowledge. The most celebrated example is "Weaker than a spider's web" derived directly from the Quran (Surah Al-Ankabut, 29:41) expressing fragility and instability (Zamakhshari, n.d.; Wierzbicka, 1992:143).

Two principal types of semantic transfer are operative in these units. Hyperbolization exaggerates animal traits to intensify human characteristics the camel's proverbial patience is magnified to represent the extremity of human endurance. Irony operates through the inversion of expected positive associations: the donkey (الحمير) often symbolizes stupidity or futile effort (Beregovskaya, 2004:71). From a cognitive perspective, these semantic shifts illustrate how metaphorical mapping operates between the animal domain and human conceptualization (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:14-16).

Lexical constructions and structural analysis. Arabic zoonymic phraseological units occur in five principal lexical-syntactic models (Kunin, 1984:45; Ammosova, 1963:28).

The **Comparative Construction (af'al al-tafdīl)** follows the structure: $af'al + animal\ name$. Examples include "More cowardly than an ostrich" and "Sharper-sighted than a crow". This is the most productive model, emphasizing comparative evaluation (Kunin, 1984:47).

The **Simile Construction (tashbīh)** follows the structure: adjective + "like/as" + animal name. Examples include "Brave like a lion" and "Cunning like a fox". Function: direct comparison and vivid imagery (Beregovskaya, 2004:74).

The **Genitive Construction (idāfa)** follows the structure: noun + animal name in genitive. Examples include "Heart of a lion" and "Eye of a falcon". Function: attributive characterization (Vinogradov, 1977:47).

Verbal Constructions follow the structure: verb + animal-based comparison. Examples include "He acted stubbornly like a donkey" and "He devours like a whale". Function: dynamic and behavioral description (Kunin, 1984:53).

Proverbs and Sayings (al-Amthal) convey moral or philosophical conclusions and are the most culturally embedded structural type, drawing on centuries of oral and literary tradition (Zamakhshari, n.d.; Maslova, 2001:62). These five structural types share common stylistic features: they are highly fixed and resistant to lexical

substitution; substitution of the animal component alters meaning; they are widely used in both literary and spoken language; and they enhance rhetorical expressiveness (Ammosova, 1963:31; Beregovskaya, 2004:76).

Cultural and cognitive dimensions. Research indicates that Arabic zoonymic phraseology is closely linked to ecological and cultural contexts (Maslova, 2001:64; Wierzbicka, 1992:143). For instance, the abundance of camel-related expressions reflects its central role in Arab life, whereas animals common in European contexts carry different semantic loads. Beregovskaya (2004:67) and Ammosova (1963:18) argue that connotative meaning dominates over denotative meaning in such expressions: the word “wolf” ($\square\square\square$) may symbolize not only a predator but also experience or danger. From a linguo-cognitive perspective, these expressions represent conceptual metaphors that encode cultural knowledge and collective experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:156; Telia, 1996:84).

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that zoonymic phraseological units function as cognitive and cultural constructs that provide insight into how language users conceptualize human traits through animal imagery (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:14; Wierzbicka, 1992:19). Their effectiveness lies in their ability to compress complex meanings into concise, expressive forms while simultaneously conveying evaluation and emotion a dual function that makes them an essential part of both everyday communication and literary discourse (Telia, 1996:112; Beregovskaya, 2004:67).

Three principal theoretical implications emerge from the structural and semantic analysis. First, the dominance of the comparative construction (af'al al-tafdīl) as the most productive structural type confirms Kunin's (1984:47) observation that comparative evaluation is the primary cognitive mechanism through which human traits are measured against animal archetypes in Arabic phraseology. This structural preference reflects a broader cognitive tendency toward graded scalar assessment the evaluation of human qualities not as absolutes but as points on a scale anchored to culturally recognized animal exemplars (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:16).

Second, the ecological basis of Arabic zoonymic phraseology the dominance of camel, lion, and desert animals over European-style domestic animals demonstrates Wierzbicka's (1992:143) principle that lexical and phraseological systems are shaped by the specific ecological and cultural environments in which communities live. The high productivity of camel-related expressions in Arabic and their virtual absence in European languages is not arbitrary but reflects the central role of the camel in the material and social life of Arab communities across centuries (Maslova, 2001:64; Baranov, 1969).

Third, the Quranic embedding of certain zoonymic expressions notably *al-ankabut* (Surah Al-Ankabut, 29:41) gives these expressions a degree of cultural and religious authority that reinforces their stability and resistance to substitution (Vinogradov, 1977:47; Zamakhshari, n.d.). This dimension of Arabic zoonymic phraseology the interpenetration of scriptural citation and everyday proverbial usage has no exact parallel in European phraseological traditions and represents a distinctive feature of Arabic linguistic culture that merits further comparative investigation.

CONCLUSION

Arabic zoonymic phraseological units constitute a complex lexical-semantic system whose meanings are primarily connotative and figurative rather than purely denotative (Beregovskaya, 2004:67; Telia, 1996:84). The analysis demonstrates that animal-based expressions serve as powerful tools for representing psychological, ethical, and social characteristics, functioning simultaneously as cognitive constructs that encode cultural knowledge and as evaluative and affective instruments of discourse (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Wierzbicka, 1992; Maslova, 2001).

Comparative constructions, similes, genitive structures, and verbal expressions dominate the lexical organization of these units, contributing to their structural diversity and expressive richness (Kunin, 1984; Ammosova, 1963; Vinogradov, 1977). The study confirms that zoonymic phraseology reflects the cultural values, historical experience, and cognitive models of the Arab people, with the ecological specificity of the Arab world above all the centrality of the camel and other desert animals directly shaping the semantic content of the phraseological inventory. Future research should focus on cross-linguistic comparative analyses of zoonymic phraseology across Arabic, English, Uzbek, and Russian, and investigate the role of such units in modern digital and media discourse, where the citation of classical proverbs in new communicative contexts generates complex intertextual effects.

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