

THE SEMANTIC CLASSIFICATION OF ANIMAL SYMBOLS IN ENGLISH

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Abstract. This article examines the semantic classification of animal symbols in English, focusing on how specific animals acquire metaphorical, cultural, and emotional meanings. The study identifies major semantic categories such as positivity, negativity, intelligence, strength, and peace, and analyzes how these symbolic meanings appear in proverbs, idioms, and common expressions. By exploring the cultural background behind animal symbolism, the article provides insights into how English speakers conceptualize human traits and social behavior through animals.

Keywords: animal symbolism, semantics, English language, metaphor, cultural meaning, idioms

Annotatsiya. Ushbu maqolada ingliz tilidagi hayvon ramzlarining semantik tasnifi o'rganiladi. Tadqiqotda hayvonlarga xos metaforik, madaniy va emotsional ma'nolar qanday shakllanishi tahlil qilinadi. Asarda ijobiylik, salbiylik, aqllilik, kuch va tinchlik kabi asosiy semantik toifalar aniqlanadi hamda ularning maqollar, idiomalar va kundalik iboralarda qanday namoyon bo'lishi ko'rsatib beriladi. Madaniy kontekstga tayangan holda, inglizlar insoniy fazilatlar va ijtimoiy xulq-atvorni hayvonlar orqali qanday tasavvur qilishlari yoritiladi.

Аннотация. В данной статье рассматривается семантическая классификация зоонимов-символов в английском языке. Анализируется, каким образом отдельные животные приобретают метафорические, культурные и эмоциональные значения. Исследование выявляет основные семантические категории, такие как

положительность, отрицательность, интеллект, сила и миролюбие, а также показывает, как эти значения проявляются в пословицах, идиомах и повседневных выражениях. Опираясь на культурный контекст, статья раскрывает, как носители английского языка воспринимают человеческие качества и социальное поведение через образы животных.

Ключевые слова: символика животных, семантика, английский язык, метафора, культурное значение, идиомы

Introduction

Animal symbols play an important role in shaping cultural imagination, linguistic expression, and collective worldview. In the English language, animals are frequently used not only as literal creatures but also as carriers of symbolic meanings that represent human qualities, emotional states, or social behaviors. Expressions such as “as brave as a lion,” “a sly fox,” or “the black sheep of the family” illustrate how deeply animal imagery is embedded in everyday communication. These symbolic meanings are not randomly assigned; rather, they emerge from cultural beliefs, historical associations, and shared human experiences.

Understanding the semantic classification of animal symbols in English allows us to explore how meaning is constructed, transmitted, and maintained within the language. By examining the metaphorical and cultural load behind common animal references, we gain insight into how English speakers conceptualize positive and negative traits, moral values, and patterns of behavior. This topic is especially relevant for linguistics, cultural studies, and language teaching, as it helps explain why certain animal-based phrases evoke particular interpretations.

This article aims to analyze the main semantic categories of animal symbols in English, focusing on how positive, negative, intellectual, physical, and social meanings are expressed through language. It also highlights examples from idioms, proverbs, and set

expressions to demonstrate how these meanings function in real communication. Through this analysis, the study provides a clearer understanding of the symbolic power that animals hold within English linguistic culture.

1. Theoretical Foundations of Animal Symbolism

The study of symbolic meaning in language has long been connected to cultural interpretation and metaphorical thinking. According to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, “metaphors are not just linguistic expressions; they are systematic conceptual mappings that shape how we understand the world” [1, p. 5]. This idea forms the basis for understanding why animals in English acquire meanings far beyond their biological characteristics.

Symbols have also been described as “the carriers of collective meanings, shared within a community and transmitted through language” [2, p. 14], as stated by Roland Barthes. This view helps explain why certain animal images-like the fox, lion, or sheep-consistently evoke similar associations among English speakers. These meanings are not created individually; they are inherited culturally and reinforced through literature, folklore, and everyday communication.

In linguistic semantics, Charles Ogden and Ivor Richards emphasized that “a symbol stands for something in virtue of an assigned meaning, not in virtue of resemblance” [3, p. 28]. This is particularly relevant to animal symbolism: a fox is not inherently “sly,” but cultural convention assigns this meaning to it.

2. Semantic Categories of Animal Symbols in English

Animal symbols in English can be grouped into several major semantic categories. These categories reflect cultural attitudes toward animals and the metaphorical associations developed over centuries.

Below is a table summarizing the most common categories:

Table 1. Semantic Classification of Animal Symbols in English

Semantic Category	Animal Examples	Symbolic Meanings	Common Expressions
Positivity / Goodness	dove, lamb, horse	peace, innocence, loyalty	“gentle as a lamb,” “work like a horse”
Negativity / Evil / Mischief	snake, rat, wolf	betrayal, danger, deceit	“a snake in the grass,” “cry wolf”
Intelligence / Cunning	fox, owl	cleverness, wisdom, strategy	“sly as a fox,” “wise as an owl”
Strength / Power / Bravery	lion, eagle, bull	courage, dominance, boldness	“brave as a lion,” “strong as a bull”
Foolishness / Weakness	donkey, sheep	stupidity, blind following	“as stubborn as a donkey,” “a sheep mentality”

3. Positive Symbolism

Positive animal symbols often represent universally admired traits. For example, the lion symbolizes bravery and leadership. As Ernst Cassirer notes, “the lion has always served as one of the most powerful symbolic images of courage in the mythologies of the world” [4, p. 102]. This symbolic status continues in English, where expressions like “lion-hearted” or “as brave as a lion” remain common.

Similarly, the dove represents peace and purity. According to Victor Turner, “symbolic animals such as the dove condense a wide range of positive moral meanings into a single culturally shared image” [5, p. 76].

4. Negative Symbolism

Animals with negative symbolic meanings often evoke fear, distrust, or moral judgment. The snake is one of the strongest negative symbols in English. As Raymond Williams observed, “the snake appears almost universally as an emblem of danger and betrayal” [6, p. 183]. Expressions like “a snake in the grass” clearly reflect this cultural association.

The wolf similarly represents danger, aggression, and deception. Although biologically wolves do not behave as maliciously as folklore suggests, English expressions such as “a wolf in sheep’s clothing” illustrate deep-rooted symbolic interpretations.

5. Intelligence and Cunning

English often uses animals to symbolize intelligence-either positively (wisdom) or negatively (cunning). The owl commonly represents wisdom. In the words of David Crystal, “the owl has become a standard emblem of knowledge and learning in English-speaking culture” [7, p. 211].

On the other hand, the fox symbolizes cleverness with a hint of deception. As Alan Dundes states, “the fox is consistently portrayed as a cunning trickster in European folklore” [8, p. 54].

6. Strength and Physical Power

Animals associated with physical strength frequently appear in idioms that highlight power or intensity. The bull, for instance, symbolizes raw physical force. Expressions like “strong as a bull” or “a bull-headed person” show how English uses animal imagery to describe human behavior.

Meanwhile, the eagle symbolizes freedom, sharp vision, and power. The bird’s symbolic meaning is well summarized by C. Saunders: “the eagle stands as an emblem of authority, vision, and elevated status in Western symbolic tradition” [9, p. 67].

7. Foolishness, Obedience, and Weakness

Some animals symbolize the absence of desirable qualities. The donkey, for example, is often associated with stubbornness or lack of intelligence. As stated by Jennifer Coates, “animal metaphors involving donkeys in English generally encode a negative evaluation of mental ability or behavior” [10, p. 92].

The sheep symbolizes blind conformity. The idiom “a sheep mentality” illustrates how English portrays passive, easily led individuals.

Conclusion

The analysis of animal symbols in English demonstrates that cultural perception plays a decisive role in shaping the semantic meanings attached to different animals. These meanings, which developed historically through myth, folklore, religion, literature, and social experience, continue to influence modern linguistic expression. Animal symbols function not only as decorative elements of language but as conceptual tools that help speakers categorize human traits, emotions, and behaviors.

The semantic categories identified in this study—positivity, negativity, intelligence, strength, and foolishness—show how English systematically associates certain animals with specific qualities. Idioms, proverbs, and figurative expressions highlight the enduring nature of these associations and their importance in everyday communication.

Overall, the semantic classification of animal symbols reveals the complex interaction between language and culture. It illustrates how symbolic meanings both reflect and shape social thought, making animal symbolism an essential subject within cultural linguistics and semantic studies.

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