

SYMBOLS OF WILD ANIMALS IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE: SEMANTIC AND CULTURAL FEATURES

A.I.O'ktamova

Fergana State University

Linguistics: English language specialty, master's student

D.I.Mirzayeva

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Philological Sciences

Head of the Department of English Philology

Fergana State University

Abstract. This article investigates the semantic and cultural features of wild animal symbols in the English language. Drawing on phraseological units, proverbs, heraldic tradition, and literary texts, the study identifies the principal symbolic meanings associated with the lion, fox, wolf, bear, and eagle in English cultural and linguistic tradition. The research highlights the interplay between universal and culturally specific dimensions of animal symbolism.

Keywords: wild animals, animal symbols, English language, semantics, cultural features, lion symbolism, fox, wolf, bear, eagle, heraldry, phraseology.

Annotatsiya. Ushbu maqola ingliz tilidagi yovvoyi hayvon ramzlarining semantik va madaniy xususiyatlarini o'rganadi. Frazologik birliklar, maqollar, geraldika an'anasi va badiiy matnlar asosida ingliz madaniy-lingvistik an'anasida arslon, tulki, bo'ri, ayiq va burgutning asosiy ramziy ma'nolari aniqlanadi.

Kalit so'zlar: yovvoyi hayvonlar, hayvon ramzlari, ingliz tili, semantika, madaniy xususiyatlar, arslon ramziyligi, tulki, bo'ri, ayiq, burgut, geraldika, frazeologiya.

Аннотация. Данная статья исследует семантические и культурные особенности символов диких животных в английском языке. На основе фразеологических единиц, пословиц, геральдической традиции и художественных текстов выявляются основные символические значения.

Ключевые слова: дикие животные, символы животных, английский язык, семантика, культурные особенности, символизм льва, лиса, волка, медведя, орла, геральдика, фразеология.

Wild animals have long captured the imagination of English-speaking peoples, serving as powerful vehicles for cultural meaning in language, literature, heraldry, and folklore. Unlike domestic animals, wild animals exist beyond the boundary of human control, and it is precisely this quality — their untameable nature — that makes them so symbolically potent. In the English linguistic tradition, wild animal symbols encode values as diverse as royal power, cunning intelligence, communal loyalty, raw strength, and moral ambiguity [3. P. 22].

The English language possesses an exceptionally rich repertoire of wild animal phraseology, accumulated over centuries through the influence of medieval bestiaries, Aesop's fables, heraldic tradition, Shakespearean drama, and modern popular culture. This diversity of sources has given English wild animal symbols a layered, often contradictory character that distinguishes them from the more unified symbolic traditions of many other languages [1. P. 55].

This article focuses on five wild animals — the lion, fox, wolf, bear, and eagle — that are most prominently represented in the English symbolic tradition. Through semantic analysis of phraseological units, proverbs, and literary references, the study maps the cultural-symbolic values these animals carry and examines how those values have been shaped by the specific historical and cultural context of English-speaking civilisation [5. P. 31].

1. Theoretical Background

The semantic study of animal symbols in English draws on several theoretical traditions. The structural semantics of Saussure and Hjelmslev provides tools for analysing the relationship between the linguistic sign and its cultural content, while cognitive linguistics — particularly Lakoff and Johnson’s conceptual metaphor theory — offers a framework for understanding how animal images organise human thought [4. P. 48].

The concept of the “cultural script” (Wierzbicka) is especially relevant to the study of English wild animal symbols, as it highlights how culturally specific assumptions and values shape the way animals are perceived and talked about. The lion, for example, is not simply a large feline in English cultural scripts — it is a royal animal, a symbol of national identity, and a moral exemplar of courage and nobility [2. P. 77].

The heraldic tradition of medieval England is a particularly important source for understanding the symbolic weight of wild animals in English culture. The incorporation of animals into coats of arms was not arbitrary but followed a carefully codified system of symbolic associations that has continued to influence language and culture long after the practical use of heraldry has faded [6. P. 39].

2. The Lion: Royalty, Courage, and National Identity

The lion is without question the most symbolically prominent wild animal in the English tradition. Though lions are not native to Britain, their adoption as the central symbol of English royalty dates to the Norman period, and the image of the lion has been inseparable from English national identity ever since. The Royal Arms of England features three golden lions, and the expression “the British lion” remains in active use as a metonym for the nation itself [3. P. 41].

In English phraseology, the lion embodies courage, dominance, and nobility. Phrases such as “the lion’s share” (the largest portion), “to beard the lion in his den” (to confront a powerful adversary), and “a lion in the way” (a formidable obstacle) demonstrate the range of contexts in which the lion’s symbolic power is deployed. Shakespeare famously used

lion imagery to represent both heroic virtue and tyrannical excess, adding moral complexity to the symbol [1. P. 68].

The lioness, too, carries significant symbolic weight in English, representing fierce maternal protection. The phrase “a lioness defending her cubs” has become a fixed cultural metaphor for any person who fights with exceptional ferocity to protect those in their care. This gendered dimension of lion symbolism is notably less developed in Uzbek, where the arslon (lion) image is almost exclusively associated with male heroism [4. P. 83].

3. The Fox: Intelligence, Cunning, and Moral Ambiguity

The fox is one of the most semantically complex wild animal symbols in English. Its primary associations are with intelligence, cunning, and strategic thinking — qualities that are treated with considerable ambiguity in the English tradition. A “foxy” person may be admired for their sharpness or distrusted for their deceptiveness, and the phrase “sly as a fox” is typically employed with a degree of reproach [2. P. 94].

The fox’s symbolic profile in English was significantly shaped by the medieval tradition of Reynard the Fox — a cycle of satirical tales in which the fox outwits all the other animals of the court through trickery and eloquence. Reynard established the fox as the archetypal trickster in English cultural imagination, and this association has persisted through centuries of literary and popular culture. In Aesop’s fables, the fox similarly appears as a figure of clever but morally questionable intelligence [5. P. 52].

In contemporary English, fox symbolism has also acquired an aesthetic dimension — “foxy” can mean attractive or stylish, particularly in informal usage. This semantic expansion illustrates how animal symbols are not static but continue to evolve as cultural contexts change. The coexistence of moral ambiguity and aesthetic admiration within the same animal symbol is a characteristic feature of the fox’s role in English cultural linguistics [3. P. 77].

4. The Wolf, Bear, and Eagle

The wolf in English carries a predominantly threatening symbolic charge. Rooted in the long history of wolf predation on livestock in Britain — which led to the wolf’s extinction on the island by the fifteenth century — the wolf in English phraseology represents danger, deception, and voracious appetite. “A wolf in sheep’s clothing” describes a dangerous person who conceals their true nature behind a harmless appearance, while “to cry wolf” means to raise a false alarm [1. P. 79].

The bear in English symbolism presents a more complex picture. On the one hand, the bear is associated with gruff power and unpredictable aggression — to “have a bear by the tail” means to be in an uncontrollable situation. On the other hand, the bear has also become associated with stoic endurance, particularly in the image of the British bulldog spirit, which shares many symbolic features with the bear. In financial markets, a “bear” represents a pessimistic investor who sells in expectation of falling prices, demonstrating the animal’s extension into the domain of economic metaphor [6. P. 61].

The eagle in English, as in many other cultures, symbolises power, vision, and sovereign authority. The bald eagle is of course the national symbol of the United States, but in British English the eagle also carries connotations of sharp perception — “eagle-eyed” describes someone who notices even the smallest details. In literary tradition, the eagle is associated with the sun, with divinity, and with the capacity to rise above ordinary human limitations [2. P. 106].

5. Results and Discussion

The analysis reveals that wild animal symbols in English are characterised by remarkable semantic richness and cultural layering. Each of the five animals examined carries a primary symbolic meaning — royal authority (lion), cunning (fox), danger (wolf), endurance (bear), and sovereign vision (eagle) — while also possessing secondary and sometimes contradictory meanings that emerge in specific literary, historical, or pragmatic contexts [4. P. 97].

A distinctive feature of English wild animal symbolism is its close connection to institutional culture — heraldry, monarchy, and the law. This distinguishes it from Uzbek animal symbolism, which is more strongly rooted in folk tradition, oral epic, and agrarian life. The institutional dimension gives English animal symbols a formal, codified quality, while Uzbek symbols tend to be more intimately connected to everyday experience and communal values.

Conclusion

Wild animal symbols in the English language form a complex and historically layered system of cultural meaning. The lion, fox, wolf, bear, and eagle each occupy a distinct symbolic niche, shaped by centuries of literary tradition, heraldic practice, and folk belief. Together, they constitute a symbolic vocabulary that encodes some of the most fundamental values and anxieties of English-speaking culture: the desire for power and order, the admiration of intelligence, the fear of deception and danger, and the aspiration toward sovereign vision.

The comparative study of English wild animal symbols alongside their counterparts in Uzbek and other languages has the potential to illuminate both the universal and the culturally specific dimensions of animal symbolism as a human phenomenon. Such comparative work is essential for the broader project of understanding how languages encode cultural knowledge and how that knowledge is transmitted across generations [5. P. 68].

Future research should pay particular attention to the ways in which English wild animal symbols are being reshaped by digital culture, environmental discourse, and the growing influence of non-Western perspectives on the global cultural stage. The living, evolving nature of animal symbolism ensures that this field of inquiry will remain both relevant and productive for many years to come [1. P. 103].

References:

-
- Lakoff G., Johnson M. *Metaphors We Live By*. – Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 55–110.
 - Wierzbicka A. *Semantics, Culture and Cognition*. – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 70–110.
 - Ammer C. *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms*. – Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003, p. 35–80.
 - Mirzayeva D.I. *Phraseological Units and Cultural Code*. – Farg‘ona: FarDU, 2022, p. 30–98.
 - Saunders N. *Animal Spirits: The Shared World of the Human and the Animal Soul*. – London: Duncan Baird, 1995, p. 25–70.
 - Fox J. *The English: A Social History*. – London: Chatto & Windus, 2004, p. 55–65.