

SYMBOLS OF WILD ANIMALS IN THE UZBEK LANGUAGE: A MIRROR OF NATIONAL CULTURE

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 explores the symbolic meanings of wild animals in the Uzbek language and their reflection of national cultural values. Through analysis of phraseological units, proverbs, epic literature, and folklore, the study examines how animals such as the wolf, fox, eagle, leopard, and snake function as cultural symbols in the Uzbek tradition and what aspects of the national worldview and mentality they reveal.

Keywords: wild animals, Uzbek language, animal symbols, wolf symbolism, eagle, fox, leopard, snake, folklore, national culture, zoomorphism, phraseology.

Annotatsiya. Ushbu maqola o'zbek tilidagi yovvoyi hayvon ramzlarining milliy madaniy qadriyatlardagi aksini o'rganadi. Frazelogik birliklar, maqollar, epik adabiyot va folklor tahlili orqali bo'ri, tulki, burgut, qoplonva ilon kabi hayvonlarning o'zbek an'anasidagi madaniy ramziy vazifalari ko'rib chiqiladi.

Kalit so'zlar: yovvoyi hayvonlar, o'zbek tili, hayvon ramzlari, bo'ri ramziyligi, burgut, tulki, qoplon, ilon, folklor, milliy madaniyat, zoomorfizm, frazeologiya.

Аннотация. Данная статья исследует символические значения диких животных в узбекском языке и их отражение национальных культурных ценностей. Через

анализ фразеологических единиц, пословиц, эпической литературы и фольклора рассматриваются символические функции волка, лисы, орла, леопарда и змеи.

Ключевые слова: дикие животные, узбекский язык, символы животных, символизм волка, орёл, лиса, леопард, змея, фольклор, национальная культура, зооморфизм, фразеология.

The relationship between the Uzbek people and wild animals is as old as the civilisation itself. Long before the emergence of settled agricultural communities on the great plains and valleys of Central Asia, the ancestors of the Uzbek people lived in close proximity to the untamed natural world, sharing territory with wolves, eagles, foxes, and leopards. This proximity generated a rich body of symbolic meanings around these animals, meanings that were preserved and elaborated through centuries of oral tradition, epic poetry, and religious thought [2. P. 19].

Wild animals in the Uzbek symbolic tradition differ fundamentally from domestic animals in the kind of cultural values they embody. While domestic animals tend to represent virtues cultivated through human society — loyalty, hard work, patience — wild animals are associated with forces that exceed social boundaries: raw courage, predatory intelligence, spiritual power, and the untameable energies of nature. It is this transgressive quality that makes wild animals such potent symbols in Uzbek culture [4. P. 36].

The present article examines five wild animals — the wolf, fox, eagle, leopard, and snake — that hold the most significant symbolic positions in the Uzbek language and cultural tradition. Through close analysis of phraseological units, proverbs, epic texts, and folk beliefs, the study aims to reveal what these animals tell us about the Uzbek national character, worldview, and value system [1. P. 48].

1. Methodology and Sources

The study employs a linguocultural methodology that treats language as a primary repository of cultural knowledge. Phraseological units, proverbs, and literary texts are analysed not only for their linguistic properties but as evidence of the cultural attitudes and

beliefs of the community that produced them. This approach, developed by scholars of linguoculturology such as V.N. Telia and further applied to Uzbek material by A. Mamatov and D.I. Mirzayeva, is particularly well suited to the study of animal symbols, which sit at the intersection of language, culture, and human psychology [5. P. 27].

Primary sources for this study include the Uzbek Phraseological Dictionary, the collected proverbs of B. Sarimsoqov, the epic poem “Alpomish”, the heroic tales of the “Gor-o‘g‘li” cycle, and selected works of classical Uzbek poetry. Secondary sources include comparative studies of Central Asian animal symbolism and the relevant scholarship of Uzbek linguists and folklorists [3. P. 41].

2. The Wolf (Bo‘ri): Strength, Danger, and Ancestral Memory

The wolf occupies a uniquely ambivalent position in Uzbek cultural symbolism. On the one hand, it is a symbol of danger, ferocity, and destructive hunger — the enemy of the flock and the terror of the night. On the other hand, the wolf is also associated with strength, endurance, and a kind of fierce independence that the Uzbek tradition regards with a degree of reluctant admiration [3. P. 58].

In Uzbek proverbs, the wolf’s negative qualities are most prominently displayed. “Bo‘ridan qo‘rqan o‘rmonga kirmas” (One who fears the wolf will not enter the forest) uses the wolf as a symbol of the dangers that must be confronted by any person who wishes to pursue their goals. “Bo‘ri qari bo‘lsa ham fe’li o‘zgarmaydi” (Even an old wolf does not change its ways) reflects the Uzbek conviction that fundamental character traits are indelible — a moral lesson delivered through the lens of wolf behaviour [2. P. 74].

Alongside this negative symbolism, however, there exists a tradition of wolf veneration in Uzbek culture that connects to ancient Turkic mythology. The she-wolf Asena is a founding figure in Turkic mythological tradition, the ancestor of the Turkic peoples according to certain legendary accounts. This mythological heritage gives the wolf a totemic dimension in Uzbek culture that complicates its more straightforward negative

symbolism and places it among the most semantically layered of all wild animal symbols in the language [6. P. 47].

In contemporary Uzbek speech, the wolf image continues to be used to describe a person of exceptional toughness and survivability. To call someone “bo‘ridek” (wolf-like) in the right context can convey admiration for their resilience and self-reliance, even as the negative connotations of predatory behaviour remain present in the background. This contextual flexibility is a hallmark of the most culturally significant animal symbols.

3. The Fox (Tulki): Cunning and Strategic Intelligence

The fox in Uzbek cultural symbolism is almost universally associated with cunning, craftiness, and strategic intelligence. Unlike the wolf, which carries a degree of admirable ferocity, the fox’s intelligence is of a more ambiguous character — it is the intelligence of the weaker party who uses wit to compensate for lack of physical strength [1. P. 82].

Uzbek folk tales abound with fox characters who outwit lions, wolves, and bears through deception and quick thinking. The Uzbek fox tale tradition, which shares many features with the Persian and Turkic trickster tale genres, consistently portrays the fox as a survivor rather than a hero — a creature whose cleverness is admirable but whose methods are morally questionable. Phraseological units such as “tulkiday ayyor” (as cunning as a fox) are among the most commonly used animal comparisons in everyday Uzbek speech [4. P. 61].

The fox’s symbolic role in Uzbek also has a gender dimension: in some traditional contexts, fox imagery is applied more frequently to women, reflecting cultural stereotypes about feminine cunning and indirection. This gendered use of fox symbolism is a feature shared with many other Central Asian and Middle Eastern linguistic traditions and provides important evidence of how animal symbols intersect with social categories [5. P. 53].

4. The Eagle (Burgut), Leopard (Qoplon) and Snake (Ilon)

The eagle (burgut) is the pre-eminent symbol of spiritual power, visionary perception, and heroic nobility in the Uzbek tradition. The eagle's ability to soar above the earth and to see with extraordinary clarity makes it a natural symbol for the ideal qualities of leadership — the capacity to rise above the ordinary and to perceive what others cannot. In classical Uzbek poetry, the eagle is frequently invoked as a symbol of the human soul's aspiration toward the divine [3. P. 89].

The eagle also plays a central role in the Uzbek tradition of falconry, known as “baykuslik” or “qushchilik”. The training and flying of eagles was a prestigious activity associated with the Uzbek nobility and warrior class, and this connection reinforced the eagle's symbolic association with power, skill, and aristocratic virtue. The phrase “burgutday” (eagle-like) in Uzbek invariably conveys admiration for a person's courage, sharpness of mind, or noble bearing [2. P. 93].

The leopard (qoplon or yo‘lbars) in Uzbek symbolism represents a combination of raw power and regal beauty. Unlike the wolf, whose power is associated with endurance and pack mentality, the leopard is a solitary hunter whose strength is paired with elegance and precision. In epic literature, heroes are frequently compared to leopards to convey the combination of ferocity and grace that defines the ideal Uzbek warrior [6. P. 72].

The snake (ilon) occupies the most complex symbolic position of all wild animals in Uzbek. It simultaneously represents wisdom and deceit, healing and poison, protection and mortal danger. In Uzbek folk belief, the snake that guards a house is considered a protective spirit, while the snake encountered in the wild is an omen of treachery. This dual symbolism is shared across many cultures and likely reflects the snake's universal role as a liminal creature that straddles the boundary between the natural and supernatural worlds [1. P. 97].

5. Results and Discussion

The analysis of wild animal symbols in the Uzbek language reveals a richly textured system of cultural meaning rooted in the nomadic and agrarian heritage of the Uzbek

people. Wild animals in this system serve as symbolic anchors for some of the most fundamental values of Uzbek culture: courage in the face of danger (wolf), strategic intelligence (fox), visionary leadership (eagle), heroic power (leopard), and the paradoxes of wisdom and deceit (snake) [4. P. 104].

A comparison with the English wild animal symbolic tradition — as examined in the companion article to this study — reveals both striking parallels and significant divergences. The fox's association with cunning is shared across both traditions, as is the eagle's association with sovereign vision. However, the wolf's totemic dimension in Uzbek has no real equivalent in English, where the wolf is almost exclusively a symbol of threat. Similarly, the leopard's heroic symbolism in Uzbek epic tradition has no direct counterpart in the English linguistic system, where big cats are represented primarily by the lion.

Conclusion

Wild animal symbols in the Uzbek language constitute an indispensable dimension of the national cultural and linguistic heritage. They encode values, beliefs, and ways of perceiving the world that have been accumulated over millennia and transmitted through the most durable of all cultural media — language itself. The wolf, fox, eagle, leopard, and snake each contribute a distinct strand to the complex symbolic fabric of Uzbek culture, reflecting the nation's historical experience of living in close contact with the natural world and drawing moral and philosophical lessons from that contact.

The linguocultural study of these symbols is not merely an exercise in historical antiquarianism. Wild animal symbols remain active and productive in contemporary Uzbek speech, literature, and media, demonstrating that the cultural codes they carry continue to resonate with modern Uzbek speakers. Understanding these codes is essential for anyone who seeks a deep knowledge of the Uzbek language and the culture it expresses [3. P. 101].

Future comparative research should situate Uzbek wild animal symbolism within the broader context of Central Asian and Turkic linguistic traditions, examining the extent to which the symbolic meanings identified in Uzbek are shared with related languages such as Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Azerbaijani. Such research would contribute significantly to our understanding of the common cultural heritage of the Turkic-speaking world and the role of animal symbolism in its linguistic expression [5. P. 79].

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