

## Comparative Study of Zoonymic Components in the texts of English and Russian Tongue-twisters

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### ABSTRACT

*This study is devoted to a comparative analysis of zoonyms in English and Russian tongue twisters. Based on a corpus of 800 examples (300 English-language examples from online sources and 500 Russian-language examples), a systematic study of the frequency and distribution of terms denoting animals is conducted. The study analyzes in detail the phonetic features of zoonyms, focusing on the influence of complex consonant clusters and vowel variations on the articulatory complexity of tongue twisters. In addition, the work examines in depth the cultural significance of animals in the context of tongue twisters of both languages. Cultural concepts, folklore motifs, and social values that determine their choice and interpretation are revealed through the comparison of the representations of different animal species. The comparative approach made it possible to identify common linguistic and cultural characteristics, as well as unique historical and social factors that determine the differences in the depiction of animals in English and Russian linguistic cultures. The study helps to understand the interaction patterns of language, phonetics and culture as it is reflected in the tongue twisters.*

**Keywords:** Tongue-twisters, zoonyms, folklore, pronunciation, phonetic complexity, linguoculturology, animals

## INTRODUCTION

Tongue-twisters are often seen as a subgenre of nursery rhymes, which are a significant part of children's literature, serving as one of the earliest literary forms children encounter. They reflect various aspects of life, such as customs and national culture, in addition, they aid children's cognitive development and help to form moral values. Even though the imagery of animals in nursery rhymes has been investigated by researchers, the linguistic look at zoonyms in tongue-twisters has not yet been made.

Zeng found that animal images carry meanings and can be both similar and opposed different in various cultures. Understanding these differences can enhance cross-cultural communication and education, helping children appreciate diverse cultural perspectives [22].

Averina studied zoonyms of sayings and proverbs in the Russian language and demonstrated that, as a rule, they reflect a source of particular cultural symbols and associations, which assist in the transfer of certain character and behavior patterns. Besides, zoonyms provide for the passing of collective knowledge and experience from generation to generation by assisting in the creation of a folkloric image of the world where animals play symbolic functions [3].

It is not rare for a tongue-twister with an animal component to include gender stereotypes. There is a stereotype that men prefer a dog to own as a pet, while women like cats more. In addition, the tongue-twister below illustrates the attitude towards pets in English culture – they are always approached by names. Stepanova gives the following example:

There was a man, and his name was Dob,  
And he had a wife, and her name was Mob,  
And he had a dog, and he called it Cob,  
And she had a cat, called Chitterabob.  
Cob, says Dob,  
Chitterabob, says Mob.  
Cob was Dob's dog,  
Chitterabob Mob's cat

According to Stepanova, it shows such a trait of the British people as love towards animals. The examples of nursery rhymes, including tongue-twisters, used in the work, illustrate care and respect when communicating with pets and animals [19].

#### METHODOLOGY

In order to see how often zoonyms are used in tongue-twisters, we studied 300 Of the most common English tongue-twisters collected by the internet resource <<https://www.tongue-twister.net/en.htm>>. When proceeding a quantitative analysis of the zoonyms in tongue-twisters, it was found that most commonly, they operate with the terms to name animals – there were 27 unique animal names used in total 40 times. There were also 11 names of sea creatures used 20 times, with fish being the most common word to denote an animal - a total of 8 tongue-twisters used the word fish in them. There were also 6 names of insects used 15 times and 5 lexemes for bird species used 6 times altogether. More detailed data can be found in the tables below.

#### RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1. *Animals, English tongue-twisters*

elephant	3
frog	3
groundhog	3
bear	3
snake	2
turtle	2
bat	2
horse	2
Маре кобыла	1
dog	1
wood chuck	1
pig	1
cow	1
ewe	1

lamb	1
sheep	2
yak	1
goat	1
ape	1
chicken	1
gopher	1
zebra	1
rat	1
cat	1
tiger	1
cheetah	1
camel	1

Table 2. *Sea creatures, English tongue-twisters*

fish	8
clam	2
toad	2
walrus	1
Sea-serpent	1
oyster	1
burbot	1
turbot	1
eel	1
octopus	1
snail	1

Table 3. *Insects, English tongue-twisters*

bug	5
fleas	4
fly	3
gnat	1
caterpillar	1
mole	1

Table 4. *Birds, English tongue-twisters*

swan	2
duck	1
finch	1

bird	1
pheasant	1

Table 5. *Animals, Russian tongue-twisters*

мышь	13
ёж	11
кот/кошка	11
бобер	9
Коза/козёл	9
заяц	8
овца	4
уж	5
баран	4
бык	3
лиса	3
Медведь	3
волк	3
змея	3
конь	3
корова	3
кобра	2
бурундук	2
зубр	2
зебра	2
бегемот	1
боров	1
вол	1
гиена	1
удава	1
жираф	1

Table 6. *Sea creatures, Russian tongue-twisters*

рак	5
краб	5
камбала	1

Table 7. *Birds, Russian tongue-twisters*

Ворон(а)	7
цыпленок	5
птица	4

грач	4
дятел	4
петух	3
гусь	2
дрозд	2
журавль	2
курица	2
гагара	1
гриф	1

Table 8. *Birds, Russian tongue-twisters*

жук	9
стрекоза	3
сороконожка	2
пчела	2
паук	1
муха	1

In the English examples, mammals are most represented, with frequent appearances by the likes of bears, groundhogs, snakes, and frogs. The most mentioned animal is fish, with eight mentions. Fleas, flies, and bugs are also highly represented and show an obsession with smaller, sound-emitting creatures.

Marine creatures like clams, toads, and a sea-serpent contribute richness to the sound, while repatriated some other foreign animals like elephants and zebras contribute novelty.

Russian tongue-twisters, by way of comparison, have a much higher frequency of animal names, with small mammals and forest dwellers coming to the forefront in specific. Most repeated of all is the “mouse” (*мышь*) at thirteen, then the “hedgehog” (*ёж*) and “cat” (*кот/кошка*) eleven times each. The mammal list drawn up is lengthy and all destined to be known in a Russian context from goat to beaver, fox, and bear. Birds too have a strong presence, specifically the “raven” (*ворона*), “chick” (*цыплёнок*), and “woodpecker” (*дятел*), along with insects like the “beetle” (*жук*) and “dragonfly” (*стрекоза*). Along with another element of sound texture are fish and crustaceans like the “crayfish” (*рак*) and “crab” (*краб*).

Comparatively, Russian tongue-twisters not only mention more animal types but are also sources of richer linguistic diversity. When looking at the animals presented in their texts, we can see that the gender also plays an important role there. While English tongue-twisters have animals neutral, in Russian ones we can find such variations as *коза/козёл* (goat) and *кот/кошка* (cat). Therefore, we can make a conclusion that in the Russian linguistic culture animals were given more liveliness and character through personification – they play social and gender roles. Family matters are also reflected in Russian tongue-twisters through various forms of animal names. Let us consider the following example:

*Испугались медвежонка Стриж стрижихой и стрижонок*

Here we can not only see the birds being a “female” (*стрижиха*) and “male” (*стриж*) representatives, but there is also a baby bird (*стрижонок*). Animals are personified; they have particular social functions. They even have emotions – *испугались медвежонка* (were scared by a baby bear).

Russian tongue twisters show a heightened focus on phonological flexibility and wordplay. They often employ zoonyms for diminutive or well-known animals, which encourage articulation and are rooted in local fauna.

Unlike Russian tongue twisters, English tongue twisters, rich in animals, emphasize rhythm and auditory perception. They usually feature creatures with obvious consonants and syllabic diversity, activating auditory creativity through a rich zoological picture.

These linguistic characteristics show that in both Russian and English, zoonyms in tongue twisters are used not only to form colorful images, but also to introduce difficult phonemes and rhythmic constructions. The differences in approach demonstrate the interaction between language and culture, even in playful forms, where the interaction of sound, meaning and memory is formed in oral tradition.

The following conclusions can be made coming out of the results:

1. *Frequency and phonetic complexity*
  - a. Zoonyms with consonant clusters, such as groundhog and woodchuck, pose significant articulation difficulties. The rapid repetition of these words requires precise control over tongue placement and airflow. Consonant cluster zoonyms groundhog and woodchuck are difficult articulation challenges. They are repeated too rapidly to permit intentional tongue positioning and control over airflow.

Vowel shifts in the words "elephant" and "octopus" also catch speakers off guard since the tongue has to rapidly move from one vowel sound to the other.

Ex. Eleven kind elephants – presents assonance – the vowel sound rhyme in words situated close to one another. Here, repetition of the "e" sound in "eleven," "benevolent," and "elephants" provides a rhythm and harmony sensation. Otherwise, the rhyming elephant in the tongue-twister helps clusters of consonants of the phonemes of different place of articulation (/l/ and /v/, /f/).
  - b. Tongue twisters frequently utilize alliteration, the repetition of initial consonant sounds, and consonance, the repetition of internal consonant sounds. Animal names with similar consonant clusters, such as "frog," "groundhog," and "bear," or with repeated consonants, like "snake" and "snail," are prime candidates for tongue twister construction. Nikolić & Bakarić believe that the repeated use of identical or nearly identical sounds within a short span, particularly at the beginning of words, can create a dissonant or unpleasant effect. This characteristic is a hallmark of tongue twisters and seems to be a common feature across different languages [15].
  - c. The number of syllables in a word can influence its difficulty. Shorter words, like "cat" or "dog," are generally easier to pronounce rapidly than longer words like "elephant" or "groundhog." However, the interplay between syllabic structure and consonant clusters can also affect the complexity. For example, "turtle" and "burbot" have similar syllabic structures but differ in their consonant clusters, making "burbot" more challenging to articulate. Regarding

Russian tongue-twisters, the same thing can be observed. Words like *бурундук* and *медведь* have a more complex, lengthy syllabic structures, which poses extra difficulty in pronunciation. *Рак* and *краб*, while being shorter words, have similar consonants and the number of syllables. When used in the same tongue-twister, they make it very easy to make a mistake for a person attempting them.

#### *Linguacultural insights*

As tongue-twisters are often used as a didactic material to train pronunciation among kids, the inclusion of variety of species increases the cognitive load, which makes them more challenging and allows children to study the world around them. Apart from that, the familiarity of an animal name can impact its effectiveness in a tongue twister. Well-known animals, such as "dog" or "cat," are often used because they are easily recognized and understood by most speakers. Less familiar animals, like "burbot" or "turbot," can add an element of surprise and challenge.

The connotations associated with an animal can also play a role. Animals with negative connotations, such as "snake", may be used to create a sense of unease or discomfort. A snake is portrayed as a negative character in its tongue-twister:

A snake sneaks to seek a snack.

Conversely, animals with positive connotations, like "swan," can evoke a more pleasant image as they are represented using positive imagery:

Six sleek swans swam swiftly southwards.

In addition to that, animals that are culturally important or have deep-rooted symbolism are more likely to appear in tongue-twisters. For example, the horse, as a symbol of power and strength, is a common choice. The UK's geographical position also explains the abundance of sea animals in tongue-twisters, as various species of fish were not uncommon for those living on an

island. In fact, the importance of fish in art, culture and food in the Palaeolithic is evident across Europe.<sup>5</sup> It potentially also explains why the word “fish” was the most common of all zoonyms in tongue-twisters studied.

When it comes to the tongue-twisters of the Russian language, there is significantly lower number of varieties presented within the tongue-twisters. In fact, while there are 11 types of sea creatures in the texts of the English tongue-twisters, the Russian ones are limited to three only. This might be related to the fact that the UK is situated on an island surrounded by ocean and the English Channel, which, in its term, means that people face the inhabitants of water regularly in their daily life. Russia is a big country; the majority of people living there might have never faced oceans or seas. As a result, they did not face as many species and they are not presented in the Russian tongue-twisters.

#### *Syntactic structure impact*

Moreover, a lot of tongue twisters are built on a particular pattern. When training a particular sound, it is typical for tongue twisters to save the familiar syntax by only changing the main words involved so that they are appropriate for the target sound studied or practiced in any other way. Animals might come in handy in these situations. For instance, one of such patterns is “how much...” Originally, the most popular one of them is How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck would chuck wood? Interestingly, woodchuck is a noun formed through compounding which allows the necessary degree of repetition of the sounds without being tautological through using its parts as independent words (wood as a noun meaning a hard substance that forms the branches and trunks of trees, and chuck as a verb to throw something carelessly). Although not all zoonyms can be separated into parts, they are still used in this pattern. By looking at the corpus of tongue-twisters in the English language, it is possible to notice the following examples with animals in them:

**Groundhog:** How much ground could a groundhog grind if a groundhog could grind ground?

**Turtle:** How much myrtle would a wood turtle hurdle if a wood turtle could hurdle myrtle?

**Yaks:** How many yaks could a yak pack pack if a yak pack could pack yaks?

**Duck:** How many ducks could a duck duct-tape, if a duck could duct-tape ducks?

**Moose:** How much snus could a moose on the loose use if a moose on the loose could use loose snus?

But what is the reason behind the popularity of one pattern through the genre? Even though the examples mentioned above contain the animal variations of the lexical component, the How much pattern is not limited to it (How much dew does a dewdrop drop? If dewdrops do drop dew? How much dough would Bob Dole dole if Bob Dole could dole dough?, etc.). Dundes suggests that when tongue-twisters are created from the syntactic point of view, they always contain “two segments, with the second being a repetition or inverted repetition of the first”. The earliest tongue-twisters find a lot of conformity towards that rule which might give evidence to this assumption. Moreover, this pattern allows the necessary concentration of phonemes, which, in its turn, makes the tongue-twister a difficult piece for someone attempting to pronounce it.

#### CONCLUSION

The choice of animal names in tongue twisters is influenced by a variety of linguistic factors, including phonological complexity, semantic associations, and cultural significance. The data suggests that tongue-twisters leverage a mix of phonetic complexity and cultural familiarity to create effective linguistic challenges. The frequent use of certain animals highlights their phonetic properties, which are used to increase the level of difficulty and to make tongue-twisters more appealing and entertaining.

The analysis reveals that both English and Russian tongue-twisters rely heavily on animal names not just for imagery, but for phonetic variety, rhythmic structure, and cultural familiarity.

Russian samples show higher lexical density and favor smaller, more phonetically agile creatures, while English tongue-twisters balance novelty and sound play with a broader zoological range.

This contrast supports the idea that animal words serve as both linguistic tools and cultural artifacts in phonological education and oral tradition.

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