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Zoomorphic Pejoratives in Gender Discourse: A Linguocultural and Comparative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Zoomorphic pejoratives negatively connoted expressions derived from animal names encode culturally shared stereotypes about human traits. This paper examines such units in English and Uzbek with a special focus on gendered meanings. A qualitative linguocultural and cognitive-semantic analysis was conducted on 250 tokens collected from contemporary usage: conversational speech, social media comments (Telegram, YouTube, Facebook), internet forums, TV discourse, and Uzbek paremiology (proverbs/sayings). Units were categorized by target (men vs. women) and by semantic domains (appearance, behavior, sexuality, age) and interpreted via metaphor/metonymy mechanisms. In Uzbek and English, frequent male-directed invectives include "pig," "dog," "donkey," "rat," "sheep"; female-directed ones include "fox," "snake," "pig," "hen," "hippopotamus." Women are more often evaluated through appearance and propriety-related imagery (e.g., "snake-eyed," "blind as a bat," "wet cat," "cackling like a hen"), while men receive frames highlighting strength/grotesque physicality or aggression (e.g., bear, gorilla, rooster). Cross-linguistic overlap indicates shared zoosemantic models despite language differences. Zoomorphic pejoratives function as linguocultural markers that reinforce gendered stereotypes and social norms; their persistence reflects entrenched conceptual metaphors ("Human is an animal") and culture-specific mental models.

Keywords: Zoomorphic pejoratives; animal metaphors; gender discourse; cognitive linguistics; metonymy; English; Uzbek

INTRODUCTION

Special attention is paid to the gender aspect: a comparative analysis is conducted of zoomorphic pejoratives aimed at men and women in the Uzbek and English languages. Zoometaphors are classified by themes appearance, behavior, sexuality, and age. Their role is emphasized as linguocultural markers reflecting social stereotypes and mental models.

Being closely linked to ethnic and cultural perceptions of the world, these lexical units serve as an effective means of expressing negative character traits. They function as a linguistic prism through which the worldview of a particular ethnos is reflected. In this regard, the topic of zoomorphic pejoratives remains relevant within the framework of modern cognitive and gender studies.

The term zoonym entered linguistic usage in the 1960s, but scholarly interest in this lexical group began to grow rapidly from the 1970s and has continued to this day. Despite the large number of studies in this field, the concept of zoonym still remains a subject of debate among linguists, as modern lexicology lacks a unified terminological clarity in designating lexical units and phraseological expressions related to animal names. One drawback of this term is that it simultaneously covers two meanings onomastic and appellative which in some speech contexts requires additional clarification.

Despite the growing interest in this lexical group since the late 20th century, various researchers continue to use different terms such as zoolexis, zoometaphor, zoomorphism, animalistic vocabulary, and zoonym. In addition, to denote the thematic group “animal names,” terms like “animalionyms” or “animalisms” are also found in scholarly literature. However, some scholars believe that such terms narrow the concept of zoonym and do not fully reflect its meaning.

According to Preobrazhenskaya, all words derived from animal names should be referred to as animalisms. Lavrova, in turn, designates the lexico-semantic group that includes animal names with the term animalistic vocabulary.

In biological classification, animals are divided into groups such as mammals, herbivores, and omnivores, depending on their anatomical and physiological characteristics. In linguistics, however, the names of living beings are classified based on human empirical experience. Living organisms are divided into those that walk or run (animals), fly (birds), live in water (fish), and crawl (reptiles). In everyday speech, animals are usually divided into functional categories wild and domestic. This universal classification is explained by the fact that domestic animals have played an essential role since ancient times as a source of food and raw materials, as well as assistants in human economic activities.

A. S. Maslova identifies three types of semantic structures of zoonyms: the actual zoonym (a neutral name of an animal), the zoometaphor (the use of an animal name in reference to a person with evaluative meaning), and zoomorphism (an intermediate category). The researcher explains that zoomorphism, unlike zoometaphor, is a way of expressing the author's subjective symbolism, and the result of metaphorical transfer does not always have a clear meaning or a stable referent.

Zoolexis, that is, animal names, represent one of the richest sources of metaphors in the language system. These units carry metaphorical motivation when used to describe people, since animals, as an important part of nature, have always been closely connected with human life. An animistic worldview has long been inherent to humanity, which led to the formation of an extensive zoo-themed metaphorical layer in language. To create vivid and emotional descriptions of others, people turned to comparing humans with animals beings that were well known and familiar to them.

Despite the existing number of studies on zoomorphic vocabulary, the functioning of pejorative zoometaphors in gender discourse remains understudied, especially in the comparison of languages as different as Uzbek and English.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The aim of this study is to identify gender-based differences in the use of zoomorphic pejoratives and to conduct their

linguocultural analysis based on the material of the Uzbek and English languages.

Based on accumulated knowledge about the structure, origin, and behavior of domestic and wild animals, languages have developed expressions in which the characteristic traits of animals are transferred to humans. In this process, zoosemantic features are used to describe human character and behavior, and semantic transformation occurs according to the model "animal → human." Drawing on centuries of human interaction with the animal world, languages have formed stable metaphorical expressions in which animal characteristics are applied to describe human behavior, appearance, and personality.

Zoometaphors are important not only as a stylistic device but also as significant linguocultural markers through which language encodes and transmits national cultural norms and values. In every culture, ancient beliefs are reflected through animal images, which over time have evolved into stable metaphorical expressions applied to humans. As a result of this process, animal images acquire additional semantic and conceptual meanings, becoming symbolic signs. Such symbols serve as a means of expressing key stereotypical ideas about human appearance, behavior, and intellectual qualities within a given society. From the perspective of semantics and cognitive linguistics, such linguistic units are considered specific linguocultural markers because they reflect mental models characteristic of a particular culture.

CORPUS DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

This study is based on a purpose-built bilingual corpus comprising approximately 250 zoomorphic pejorative expressions documented in Uzbek and English. To ensure representativeness and contextual authenticity, data were sourced from multiple discourse domains.

1. **Spoken discourse**: spontaneous informal conversations among native speakers across different age groups and genders, recorded or transcribed from everyday interaction;

2. **Digital discourse**: user-generated comments, discussions, and memes from social media platforms such as Telegram, YouTube, and Facebook, which provided access to contemporary colloquial language and youth slang;
3. **Online forums and blogs**: opinion posts and conversational threads where pejorative usage appears in more reflective or argumentative contexts;
4. **Mass media**: Uzbek television talk shows, entertainment programs, and interviews, offering examples from public and semi-formal discourse;
5. **Paremiological sources**: traditional proverbs, sayings, and folk narratives, representing culturally entrenched metaphorical models.

SOURCES OF ENGLISH DATA COMPRISED

1. Contemporary literary texts (fiction and non-fiction, 20th–21st centuries) providing stylistically diverse instances of figurative language;
2. Journalistic and media discourse, including opinion pieces, interviews, and entertainment articles, which often embed gendered evaluative language;
3. Online conversational discourse, such as forums, comment sections, and transcripts of casual spoken interaction, capturing colloquial and often unfiltered use.

Each expression was collected together with its co-textual environment (sentence or paragraph), communicative setting (spoken, digital, media, traditional), speaker/writer gender (where identifiable), and target gender of the pejorative. This allowed the analysis not only of isolated lexical units but also of their pragmatic functions and evaluative force in context.

Selection criteria were deliberately restrictive to ensure the focus on genuinely figurative and evaluative usage. Expressions were included only if they:

1. Referred metaphorically or metonymically to humans rather than animals in literal sense;

2. Carried explicit or implicit negative evaluation (pejorative meaning);
3. Were sufficiently conventionalized or recurrent to reflect socially recognizable stereotypes.

Proper nouns (nicknames, anthroponyms) were excluded unless their metaphorical meaning had become lexicalized. Homonymous uses without figurative connotations were also filtered out. The resulting corpus represents a balanced dataset of evaluative zoomorphic expressions with clear gender orientation and cultural salience.

CRITERIA FOR INCLUSION AND CATEGORIZATION

All extracted items were systematically annotated and organized according to the following parameters:

1. **Target gender**: whether the pejorative was applied to men or women;
2. **Semantic domain**: the aspect of human characterization involved – appearance, behavior, sexuality, or age;
3. **Tropic mechanism**: metaphor (transfer of animal attributes to humans) or metonymy (association based on contiguity or salient traits).

This coding scheme allowed for cross-linguistic comparison and the identification of gendered asymmetries in evaluative patterns.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

A qualitative, interpretive approach was employed, grounded in the principles of cognitive and linguocultural linguistics. The analysis relied on three complementary methodological pillars:

1. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson), to explain how animal imagery functions as a cognitive scaffold for structuring evaluations of human traits;

2. Prototype semantics, to identify the culturally salient and prototypical features attributed to particular animal categories and mapped onto humans;
3. Linguocultural analysis, to interpret culturally embedded stereotypes, symbolic associations, and mental models underlying the use of zoomorphic pejoratives in both languages.

The triangulation of these approaches enabled a nuanced examination of how zoomorphic pejoratives encode and reinforce gendered stereotypes, while also revealing cross-cultural parallels and divergences in the conceptualization of gender through animal imagery.

RESULTS

The analysis revealed clear gender-based asymmetries in the use of zoomorphic pejoratives in Uzbek and English. The most frequently occurring male-directed invectives included “pig,” “dog,” “donkey,” “rat,” and “sheep.” In contrast, the most common female-directed metaphors were “fox,” “snake,” “pig,” “hen,” and “hippopotamus.” These expressions consistently carry strong negative evaluative connotations and reflect entrenched social stereotypes.

Negative zoolexical items directed at women often reproduce patriarchal cultural patterns, attributing to them traits such as cunning (fox), stupidity (hen), aggression (snake), or promiscuity (sheep, goat). Such associations demonstrate the persistence of deeply rooted attitudes toward women’s roles in society and position female identity within a narrow framework of normative expectations.

Particularly striking were zoomorphic pejoratives describing women’s appearance. These expressions are typically constructed by comparing female physical features to those of animals, which not only intensifies expressiveness but also reinforces stereotypes that undermine women’s dignity. They most frequently target features such as the eyes, hair, and overall appearance. This shows that women are often evaluated through visual and

aesthetic criteria, while men are more frequently characterized through behavioral and physical-strength attributes.

In her work *Animal Equality: Language and Liberation*, J. Dunayer explores the discriminatory dimension of animal-based terms and argues that such expressions, when used to demean certain groups of people such as women or Black individuals – reinforce broader patterns of political inequality among humans. She notes that these zoometaphors vary in the degree of insult they carry: for example, chick is used to refer to a young woman in a diminutive way, whereas vixen portrays a woman as spiteful or domineering.

A striking observation in Dunayer's analysis is that many of the most derogatory feminine zoometaphors are drawn from domesticated animals bred to serve human needs, which symbolically positions women as subservient. The term "cow," associated with constant pregnancy and milk production, is often applied to depict overweight and dull women, while bitch literally a female dog bred primarily for reproduction is used to label women as malicious and self-serving.

Dunayer also cites A. P. Nielsen, who satirically outlines the stages of a woman's life through "chicken" metaphors:

> A young girl is a chick. Once she grows up, she marries and soon begins to feel cooped up. To escape the monotony, she attends hen parties and cackles with her friends. Over time, she has her brood, starts henpecking her husband, and eventually turns into an old biddy.

According to Dunayer, comparing women to chickens reflects a "contemptuous attitude," as chickens are regarded merely as egg producers or sources of meat, thereby reducing women to beings valued only for their reproductive function and utility.

Masculine-oriented zoometaphors can be just as offensive as feminine ones. In English, some of the most salient animal-based epithets such as animal or beast are used almost exclusively to describe men, often portraying them as brutal or uncivilized. However, it is important to note that gendered zoometaphors are culturally and nationally specific. For instance, Russian speakers

tend to associate the term snake with a deceitful woman, while English speakers are more likely to link snake to a treacherous man. At the same time, many zoometaphors are cross-gender in nature and can insult both men and women equally.

An example of this universality is the zoonym cat: in English it can neutrally refer to a man, but when applied to a woman it often implies gossipiness or quarrelsomeness. Another case is swine used during the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign when Barack Obama remarked, "You can put lipstick on a pig, but it's still a pig." While the comment was ostensibly directed at the Republican team of John McCain and Sarah Palin, the mention of lipstick caused many to interpret it specifically as an insult aimed at Palin (who had previously referred to herself as a "pit bull with lipstick").

Importantly, zoometaphors do not always carry purely pejorative meanings. As Nagornaya observes, their evaluative force is often ambiguous, allowing them to oscillate between negative and positive connotations depending on context. In this respect, zoomorphic euphemisms function quite differently from pejorative metaphors. Even a cursory analysis of euphemism dictionaries shows that such euphemisms are relatively rare, often semantically opaque, and typically refer to taboo concepts that are morally restricted from direct mention.

These include references to:

- **Crime and law enforcement** (cat, mouse, canary for police informants; bull, bear for police officers or detectives; horse for drugs),
- **Sexuality** (chicken, lamb, hawk, birdie for homosexual men; dove, goose, nightingale for prostitutes; frog for condom),
- **Body-related terms** (worm, serpent, snake, eel, dog for male genitals; cat, beaver, mink for female genitals),
- **Mental disorders** (squirrel, ape for psychiatric patients), and others.

Unlike conventional pejoratives, these euphemistic zoomorphisms often function as part of argot or secret slang used

within closed social groups to conceal information from outsiders. Their use is also motivated by social constraints avoiding direct naming helps maintain politeness, protect the speaker's face, and adhere to moral or safety considerations. Their seemingly simple and nontransparent nature actually makes them difficult to decode, which explains their resilience and productivity in language.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated that zoomorphic pejoratives are powerful linguistic tools that both reflect and reinforce culturally embedded gender stereotypes. By examining approximately 250 expressions in Uzbek and English, the analysis revealed distinct gender asymmetries: male-directed zoometaphors predominantly emphasize physical strength, aggression, or animalistic savagery (beast, bull, dog), while female-directed ones frequently target appearance, submissiveness, or sexuality (hen, cow, chick, vixen). Such figurative language encodes not only individual attitudes but also collective cultural norms about gender roles.

The findings confirm that zoomorphic pejoratives operate as linguocultural markers, linking animal traits to human characteristics through entrenched conceptual metaphors. These expressions carry strong evaluative meaning and contribute to the symbolic construction of gender identities. Female-associated metaphors, often rooted in domestic animals, reinforce patriarchal notions of women as decorative, reproductive, or subservient, whereas male-associated metaphors tend to frame men as physically powerful yet potentially dangerous or uncivilized.

At the same time, the study has shown that some zoometaphors are ambivalent and can target both genders with similar derogatory force, underscoring their universal evaluative potential. The analysis also highlighted the existence of zoomorphic euphemisms, which differ from pejoratives in their covert, semantically opaque nature and their function in avoiding taboo topics.

Overall, zoomorphic pejoratives are not merely stylistic devices: they are cognitive and cultural instruments through which language encodes social hierarchies and transmits values. Understanding their gendered patterns contributes to broader insights into how language shapes and perpetuates social perceptions of masculinity and femininity. Future research could expand this work by exploring diachronic changes in such metaphors, their reception by different audiences, and their presence in other linguistic and cultural contexts.

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