

Cultural and Historical Context of English Zoonym Comparisons

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ABSTRACT

Comparison is one of the oldest and most expressive devices in the English language. It not only imbues speech with imagery and emotion but also reflects a national worldview, value system, and cultural characteristics. Each comparison carries a cultural and historical code an echo of a particular era, beliefs, traditions, and social norms. This article examines the cultural and historical context of English comparison, which allows for a deeper understanding of the development of the language, as well as the characteristics of English thought and imagery.

Keywords: Comparison, cultural, historical context, cultural code

INTRODUCTION

Comparison is one of the most important expressive tools in the English language, serving both cognitive and cultural-aesthetic functions. Comparisons reflect the distinctive worldviews of a people, their values, traditions, and historical experience. Therefore, the study of English comparisons requires not only a linguistic but also a cultural-historical approach.

The aim of this article is to consider the classification of English comparisons taking into account the cultural and historical context, to identify their features and to show how they reflect the evolution of the English linguistic picture of the world.

METHODS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In the given article, the study of the cultural and historical aspects of comparisons relies on an interdisciplinary approach: a combination of historical-linguistic and linguacultural approaches. This makes it possible to trace the origins, changes in meaning, and cultural connotations of units (comparisons) across different eras.

The study of the cultural and historical context of English comparisons draws on a wide range of scholarly works covering the fields of phraseology, cultural linguistics, cognitive linguistics, and semantics. The theoretical basis of the research is comprised of works devoted to the nature of set expressions, their figurativeness, and their connection to national worldviews. The classical foundations of phraseological theory are laid in the works of V. V. Vinogradov, A. V. Kunin, N. M. Shansky and R. Hild, where set expressions are considered as a special category of vocabulary, possessing a holistic meaning and cultural connotation. In the English linguistic tradition, comparison approaches were developed by A. P. Cowie, J. Seidl and W. McCord, who identified comparisons as a separate subgroup of phraseological units, distinguished by a high degree of imagery and cultural motivation.

Of great importance for the analysis of the cultural aspect are works on linguacultural studies – in particular, the works of V. A. Maslova, E. M. Vereshchagin, and V. G. Kostomarov, where language is considered as a form of cultural existence and a means of reflecting national values.

According to V. Maslova, comparison is not simply a stylistic device, but a way of conceptualizing reality that reveals the connection between language, culture, and consciousness. Maslova emphasizes that each comparison draws on culturally significant images ingrained in collective memory, and therefore their meaning cannot be understood without considering the historical and cultural background [2: 144-152].

In the context of the English tradition, a similar approach was developed by researchers Anna Wierzbicka and Claire Kramsch, who emphasized the relationship between linguistic

forms and the cultural scripts ingrained in the minds of speakers. Anna Wierzbicka views comparisons as an important tool for expressing national worldviews and as a key to understanding how culture structures the meaning of words and expressions [4: 1-22].

Historical studies of English comparisons are presented in works on diachronic phraseology, which analyze the origins and development of images. For example, the works of C. Ferguson and M. Clarke trace the influence of biblical, classical, and medieval sources on the formation of set similes in English. Thus, the expressions “as brave as a lion” and “as proud as a peacock” are rooted in biblical and classical symbolism, emphasizing the importance of cultural context in their interpretation.

Set expressions with a zoonym component are related to metaphorical phraseological units based on “various types of similarity, real or imaginary” [1: 244]. Based on metaphorization and comparison, they highlight human qualities and represent expanded descriptions of an object or action [3: 94].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Zoonym comparisons in the English language represent an important layer of phraseology, reflecting centuries of human interaction with the animal world, as well as cultural archetypes, religious symbols, and everyday observations. As research (Lakoff & Turner, Kövecses, Leech) demonstrates, such comparisons operate at the intersection of ethological reality, cultural models, social stereotypes, and artistic imagery. For example:

As brave as a lion - In many cultures, including England, the lion traditionally symbolizes strength, courage, and nobility. In the English cultural and historical context, this image has particular significance: since the 12th century, the lion has been depicted on the coat of arms of England and the British monarchy. It is associated with royal power, bravery, and dignity. For example, the coat of arms of Richard I (Richard the Lion heart) features three lions, and his nickname itself has become a

symbol of courage and heroism. In English literature and folklore, the lion often appears as the ideal warrior and protector: in medieval chronicles, as a symbol of knightly valor; in fairy tales and fables, as a just, noble king of the beasts; in works such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis, the lion Aslan symbolizes not only courage, but also spiritual strength, wisdom, and sacrifice.

To be proud as a peacock - This comparison harks back to the enduring cultural symbolism of the peacock, which for millennia has been associated with splendor, royalty, and ostentatious beauty. Historically, the peacock was known in Europe as an exotic bird, first brought from the East in ancient times. Already in Ancient Greece, it was associated with the goddess Hera, who, according to myth, adorned the peacock's tail with the eyes of her guardian, Argus. This mythological motif attached to the bird the semiotic complex of "pride-beauty-dazzlement," which was then inherited by the Roman and medieval European traditions. In England, the peacock became a cultural symbol around the 13th-14th centuries, when the bird was first imported in large numbers and became the "parade animal" of the aristocracy. The peacock adorned royal courts, castle parks, and coats of arms, simultaneously evoking admiration and irony. The comparison "to be proud as a peacock" is a striking example of English folklore and cultural code, where the zoonym functions as a cultural symbol of a negative or ironic evaluation of ostentatious behavior. Historically, the motif of the peacock's pride developed at the intersection of Greek mythology, Christian symbolism, medieval visual culture, and the social-satirical tradition of modern times.

The comparison "as cunning as a fox" draws on an ancient zoomorphic symbol present in virtually all Indo-European cultures. The fox has long been perceived as an animal combining agility, cunning, resourcefulness, and the ability to deceive. These characteristics became entrenched in folklore, mythology, and fairy tale tradition long before the emergence of established similes in the English language. In ancient times, the fox figured in Aesop's fables as the archetype of the cunning man who wins not by force but by cleverness and manipulation.

It was the Aesopian tradition that exerted a powerful influence on the entire European fox tradition and was already widespread in England in the early Middle Ages thanks to Latin adaptations. In medieval Western Europe, the fox image was further developed in the Reynard the Fox cycle of tales, a complex satirical allegory of human society. Through these texts, the fox is established as a master of intrigue, a symbol of social intellectualism and ambivalent morality.

In the Anglo-Saxon period, the image of the fox was already known, although less developed than in the continental tradition. In Old English bestiaries, the fox is described as an animal of “double nature”: soft and attractive on the outside, but “full of deceit” on the inside. Bestiaries emphasized behavioral cunning: the ability to feign death to lure prey. This symbolic image migrated into moralistic literature, retaining the connotations of cunning, dissimulation, and strategic deception.

Comparison in its modern, recognizable form has been recorded in written sources since the 17th century, but the semantic content is found earlier – as early as the 16th century, expressions like:

- “a crafty fox”
- “as sly as a fox”

The form with cunning became stable in the modern period, which is associated with the stylistic development of the word cunning (Old English *cunnan* – “to know, to be able” → “skillful, skilled” → “dexterous, cunning” → “cunning”). Unlike the simile “proud as a peacock,” which has a hint of irony, the comparison “as cunning as a fox” carries a decidedly negative connotation, less often a neutral, admiring one (in the context of strategy, intelligence, and prudence). The comparison belongs to the class of characterological similes, which describe stable personality traits.

The comparison “as fat as a pig” belongs to a group of English bodily-evaluative zoonym comparisons and dates back to the ancient agricultural culture of Britain. The pig was one of the first domesticated animals in England (archaeological evidence

dates active pig farming to early Celtic communities). Even in early Indo-European traditions, the pig was associated with bodily abundance, satiety, density, and a heavy constitution.

In the Anglo-Saxon era, the pig was the typical farm animal, which created a persistent association between excess body fat, satiety, well-fedness, and the pig as a standard of fatness. In its early stages, this was not a judgmental but a natural, observational association that captured the animal's biological characteristics: pigs were indeed the primary source of lard and fat, making them the most obvious standard of body size.

Thus, the image of the pig as the embodiment of excess weight originates from objective agricultural realities and later acquires symbolic meaning. By the 13th and 14th centuries, a negatively charged symbolic complex had become entrenched in English culture: “fat pig = rude, ill-mannered, gluttonous person.” Before the emergence of the modern form, expressions such as:

- “as fat as any sow,”
- “fat as bacon,”
- “as round as a hog.”

These expressions are recorded in texts from the 15th and 16th centuries, but are of a local and regional nature.

The next comparison “grin like a Cheshire cat” is one of the most recognizable English-language comparisons, closely associated with both the regional culture of England and the literary interpretations of the Victorian era. Despite its global popularity following the publication of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), the expression has earlier and more complex cultural roots, allowing it to be seen as a prime example of the interplay of local folklore, regional symbolism, and literary adaptation. In English folklore, cats are ambivalent, associated with cunning, unpredictability, and magic, but also with domesticity and the ability to survive. The comparison “grin like a Cheshire cat” enhances the positive side of the image: it connotes contentment, confidence, self-sufficiency, and

sometimes irony. A smile, or grin, in English culture is not only an expression of emotion but also a social sign.

Grin can be: secretive, ambiguous, sarcastic, or expressing inner satisfaction. Thus, this comparison does not simply describe a smile, but a contextually charged expression, often with a hint of cunning, confidence, or mockery.

The comparison “as quiet as a lamb” belongs to the category of zoonym phraseological comparisons, which are based on stable cultural ideas about the behavioral qualities of certain animals. In this case, the culturally marked image of a lamb serves as a symbol of humility, gentleness, and harmlessness, and this image was formed at the intersection of three key traditions: biblical-Christian, agrarian-pastoral, and folklore-literary. The symbol of “lamb” in English-speaking culture is deeply rooted in the biblical system of imagery, dating back to:

- Agnus Dei ('Lamb of God') – a symbol of Christ's sacrifice;
- An image of sinlessness, humility, and innocence;
- Old Testament rituals of blemish-free sacrifice.

These associations formed a persistent image of the lamb as a creature: gentle, defenseless, devoid of aggression and noisiness.

Therefore, already in Middle English, lamb acquired the status of a semantic archetype of meekness. In English nursery rhymes, lullabies, and shepherd's ballads, the lamb appears as a symbol of purity, silence, and peace. For example, in “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” the lamb embodies kindness, gentleness, and loyalty.

Thus, by the 18th and 19th centuries, the image had become a linguistic and cultural stereotype that required no explanation and was understood without context.

The comparison “as busy as a bee” is among the oldest and most enduring figurative expressions in the English language, reflecting centuries-old cultural notions of industriousness, collectivism, and social order. Its development is linked to the agrarian culture of Western Europe, the mythology of Indo-European peoples, and the development of Christian symbolism,

where the bee served as an image of piety and discipline. Over time, the expression became entrenched in popular speech, entered the literary language, and became a key part of English paroemiology and folklore. In Anglo-Saxon culture, the bee also held high semiotic significance. Poetic texts of the Old English era note metaphors linking bees with divine order and creative activity. In Anglo-Saxon legal codes (7th-11th centuries) and rural folklore, the bee is mentioned as a valuable and “honest” creature, whose activities benefit the community.

Early folklore texts that refer to the bee as a hardworking creature include:

- **English nursery rhymes:** “How doth the little busy bee” (Isaac Watts 1715), where the bee is presented as an ideal example of activity and moral behavior;
- **Proverbs:**
 - A bee is never idle;
 - Every busy bee makes honey;
 - The bee works, the drone eats.

In modern English, “as busy as a bee” is considered a common colloquial comparison. It has retained its positive connotation and is used in everyday speech as well as in fiction, journalism, and children’s books. The comparison continues to convey the cultural and historical values of the English-speaking world – a focus on constant activity, hard work, and usefulness.

CONCLUSION

A cultural and historical analysis of zoonym components in English comparisons suggests that zoonyms form one of the most vivid and enduring layers of English imagery, reflecting multilayered national understandings of the world, values, and social roles. English comparisons involving animals possess deeply rooted cultural symbolism, which has evolved over centuries under the influence of mythological tradition, Christian symbolism, agrarian lifestyle, and later, literary canon and urban folklore.

Historically, zoonym images were entrenched in the English linguistic worldview through observation of nature and through socially significant metaphorical models derived from Indo-European heritage. Thus, the fox became a universal symbol of cunning and guile, the bee of industriousness and organization, the peacock of excessive pride and ostentation, and the lamb of meekness and obedience. These images were recorded not only in colloquial speech, but also in early sources: Anglo-Saxon poetry, medieval sermons, chivalric romances, Protestant educational literature and children's folklore.

Each zoonym functions in comparison not only as a biological object, but above all as a model of cultural interpretation, actualizing values specific to English culture – rationality, moderation, moral discipline, practicality, and social organization. English comparisons, unlike many Eastern European models, are less prone to hyperbole or emotional expression and more often reflect a pragmatic, everyday evaluative function.

The image of the fox as a cunning animal or the bee as a symbol of labor is universal across many cultures, confirming the general patterns of anthropocentric metaphorization. However, the English tradition more often strives for a moralistic evaluation and correlation of human behavior with the norms of social order. Thus, zoonym comparisons in English represent a multi-component cultural and linguistic phenomenon, combining historically stable symbols, national values, and universal anthropological patterns. Studying them allows for a deeper understanding of the specifics of the English linguistic worldview, the mechanisms by which cultural meaning is formed, and the ways in which human behavior is interpreted through the use of animals as role models. This layer of linguistic culture remains dynamic, preserving traditional models while simultaneously adapting to the contemporary realities of English society.

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