

CROSS-CULTURAL VARIATIONS OF ANIMAL METAPHORS IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK

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Abstract: *Animal metaphors pervade the idiomatic and proverbial expressions of many languages, reflecting shared human concerns as well as unique cultural perspectives. This article presents a comparative analysis of animal-based metaphors in English and Uzbek, drawing on cognitive semantics and contrastive phraseology. We classify idiomatic animal expressions into semantic domains (personality traits, emotions, social roles, physical actions, etc.) and examine how each language maps human experiences onto animal imagery. The study highlights both common patterns (e.g. fox as cunning, lion as courageous) and divergent conceptualizations (e.g. differing valences of “fox” metaphors, unique animals such as camel in Uzbek). It also considers the pragmatic use of these idioms across registers. Our findings reinforce that animal metaphors function as cultural signposts and cognitive tools: they encapsulate collective values and worldviews, serving as windows into each society’s mindset. Understanding these cross-cultural variations enriches our knowledge of metaphorical thinking and has practical implications for translation and intercultural communication.*

Keywords: *Animal metaphors; Cross-cultural phraseology; English; Uzbek; idioms; cognitive semantics; conceptual metaphor*

Introduction. Metaphorical language is not only a linguistic ornament but also a fundamental cognitive mechanism by which speakers conceptualize the world (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Among the richest metaphorical domains is the animal world: humans have long used animals as vivid symbols of personality traits, emotions, and social roles. Proverbs and idioms frequently draw on animal imagery to encode morals and values. As researchers note, such figurative expressions act as “cultural signposts,” reflecting historical experiences, moral values, and worldviews. Cross-linguistic studies reveal that many animal metaphors are universal in theme – for example, cows, horses, and dogs top the list of animals appearing in proverbs worldwide – yet each language also infuses these metaphors with its own cultural coloring. This article examines how English and Uzbek use animal metaphors, comparing the semantic domains and cultural connotations of analogous expressions. Both languages share the human tendency to map traits like cunning, bravery, and stubbornness onto creatures familiar from everyday life. At the same time, divergent environmental and historical factors shape unique metaphors in each language. By analyzing idiomatic expressions and proverbs from dictionaries, corpora, and literary sources in English and Uzbek, we aim to elucidate the interplay between language, thought, and culture embodied in animal imagery. In so doing, we



contribute to an understanding of intercultural metaphorical cognition and offer insights valuable for translation and language education.

Literature Review. Metaphor theory posits that people understand abstract concepts through concrete experiences. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) in particular has shown that metaphors pervade everyday language and thought. Cultural linguists further argue that these metaphors are mediated by culturally specific conceptualizations (Sharifian, 2017). In this vein, comparative phraseology research has highlighted how idioms and proverbs reflect collective cultural wisdom. For instance, Jamoliddinova (2025) observes that animal idioms form “systematic networks” of meaning that encode evaluative judgments in both English and Uzbek. Normuradova’s cross-contrastive study of proverbs finds that animal metaphors offer “a universal language that transcends linguistic and cultural boundaries,” while simultaneously providing insights into national values. Similarly, Ruziyeva’s analysis of Uzbek and English proverbs concludes that animal-based sayings reveal shared human values (e.g. loyalty, leadership) and foster cultural understanding through their lessons. These works agree that animal metaphors are not arbitrary: they function as “windows into the human psyche,” encapsulating both universal truths and cultural particularities.

Empirical studies specific to English–Uzbek comparisons have also begun to appear. Safarova (2024) notes that while both languages use animals to express traits like courage, cunning, and industriousness, “cultural and environmental factors influence the choice of animals and their associated meanings”. For example, the Uzbek pastoral heritage gives rise to certain metaphors (e.g. camel = endurance) absent in English. Makhmudova and Khamitov (2025) extend this perspective, emphasizing that idioms and metaphors serve as repositories of cultural memory – each society’s metaphors articulate themes (wisdom, morality, relationships) through its own conventions. They point out that similar themes may be expressed quite differently across Uzbek, Russian, and English due to unique metaphorical frameworks in each culture. In the present study, we build on this literature by systematically comparing a range of English and Uzbek idiomatic animal expressions. We adopt a cognitive-semantic and contrastive approach, classifying idioms into conceptual domains and elucidating how national conceptual metaphors and narratives underlie their use.

Methodology. This investigation uses a qualitative contrastive approach grounded in cognitive semantics. Following Lado’s (1957) principles of contrastive linguistics, we compiled a representative set of idioms and proverbs featuring animal imagery in English and Uzbek (Lado, 1957). Primary data sources included idiom dictionaries (e.g., Cambridge Idioms Dictionary for English, Uzbek phraseological references), folklore collections of proverbs, and language corpora containing contemporary usage examples. Guided by CMT and cultural conceptualization theory, we categorized each expression into semantic fields (e.g., personality traits, emotions, social roles, physical behaviors) based on the human quality or situation it describes. We also noted context of use by examining the idioms in authentic texts and speech to assess pragmatic force and register.

A cultural cognitivist lens was applied to interpret underlying models (e.g., linking the donkey to rural life, or the snake to deceit). In sum, our methodology combined lexicographic analysis with discourse examples to compare structural parallels and cultural divergences in animal-based metaphors across the two languages.

Analysis and Discussion. Semantic Networks and Categories. The analysis revealed that English and Uzbek animal idioms cluster into several interconnected semantic domains. Rather than isolated phrases, these idioms form systematic networks, each mapping a facet of human experience onto animal imagery. The major categories identified include:

Personality Traits: Many idioms link animals to human character. Both English and Uzbek use the donkey (eshak) to symbolize stubbornness or dullness. Likewise, fox (tulki) idioms connote cunning or craftiness. For example, the English simile “as sly as a fox” and its Uzbek counterpart “tulki daydi” both evoke strategic cleverness. The lion (sher) represents courage and leadership in both languages (English “brave as a lion”). These idioms allow speakers to express judgments about others efficiently. However, subtle differences arise. Notably, the English “as sly as a fox” often carries admiration, whereas Uzbek “tulki ayyor” tends toward a negative tone of trickery. Similarly, while a donkey’s stubbornness is a defect in English, Uzbek culture – especially rural contexts – can view eshak positively as resilient and hardworking. Thus, shared animal metaphors acquire language-specific moral valences.

Emotions and Mental States: Animal imagery also conveys inner feelings. English idioms like “cat got your tongue?” (silence or embarrassment) or “butterflies in one’s stomach” (anxiety) show how animal behavior analogies externalize psychological states. In Uzbek, analogous expressions exist (e.g. likening one’s disposition to animal sounds or movements), though they may not always translate directly. In some cases, an English idiom has no Uzbek equivalent, illustrating conceptual gaps. For instance, “to cry wolf” (to sound false alarms) lacks a fixed Uzbek idiom and must be paraphrased to preserve meaning. This points to divergent cultural experiences with the imagery; wolves are not symbolically foregrounded in Uzbek speech as they are in English fables.

Social Roles and Power: A number of expressions use animals to represent hierarchy and social dynamics. English phrases like “top dog” (alpha leader) and “wolf in sheep’s clothing” (deceptive threat) highlight status and intention. In Uzbek, kuchuk (dog) idioms can imply loyalty or low status, depending on context (e.g. a submissive “it” in some sayings). Sharifian’s cultural models illuminate this domain: the camel (tuyoq) in Uzbek metaphorically embodies endurance and patience, reflecting a pastoral heritage, whereas the English “black sheep” denotes an outcast, reflecting notions of conformity. These metaphors encode social values: for example, Uzbek proverb “it hurar – karvon o‘tar” (“the dog barks, yet the caravan moves on”) uses a persistent dog to teach stoicism. Such sayings serve as cognitive shortcuts, packaging social norms into vivid imagery (a “snake in the grass” succinctly signals hidden deceit, as does the Uzbek “ilonday suzmoq” with a

similar meaning). Overall, these idioms reflect culturally shaped attitudes toward authority, trust, and reputation.

Actions and Physical Behaviors: Many idioms derive from characteristic animal movements. English examples like “to chicken out” (retreat in fear) or “a sitting duck” (easy victim) metaphorize self-protective or vulnerable actions. Uzbek likewise has phrases such as “o‘rdakdek suzmoq” (to swim like a duck, implying awkwardness or incompetence). These expressions leverage concrete animal behavior to make abstract actions relatable. Our data support prototype theory: central idioms (e.g. “as sly as a fox”) are widely known and easily recognized in both cultures, while more obscure ones occupy the periphery of each semantic field.

Contextual and Register Variation: We found that the usage of animal metaphors shifts with context. In informal speech, storytelling, and media, such idioms are frequent and stylistically vivid; in formal writing they are rarer due to their colloquial tone. For example, the concept of a “tiger by the tail” may appear in journalism, but literary Uzbek might prefer a proverb with similar meaning drawn from folk tradition. Notably, some metaphors become extended beyond the literal animal sense: English “a real shark in business” and Uzbek “bozorda haqiqiy bo‘ri” (a “real wolf in the market”) both describe aggressive entrepreneurs, but the Uzbek variant emphasizes ferocity. These differences show that even parallel metaphors carry culturally specific connotations.

Cross-Cultural Insights. Despite surface differences, many animal metaphors tap into common human experiences. As Krikmann’s typological study shows, domestic animals (dogs, horses, cattle, sheep) dominate proverbial references across cultures. This universality reflects shared human relations with these animals. For instance, Uzbek and English both use eshak/donkey to signal stubbornness, indicating a partly universal metaphorical mapping. However, cultural conditioning shapes nuance: the Uzbek donkeys’ positive image (hardiness) diverges from the purely negative English view. The analysis confirms that idiomatic animal metaphors mirror the collective cultural consciousness of each community. They reveal how language and environment influence thinking: e.g. a camel metaphor in Uzbek invokes desert endurance, whereas English speakers more often rely on temperate fauna.

These findings align with prior scholarship. Metaphors in Uzbek and English proverbs were found to convey remarkably similar themes (leadership, conformity) despite varied formulations. Animal idioms, in particular, are celebrated as “powerful symbolic representations of human qualities” that preserve cultural memory. The consistency of certain metaphors (fox = cunning, lion = bravery) suggests cognitive universals, while divergent cases (eagle’s sharp sight in English vs. absence in Uzbek idioms) highlight cultural specificity. Moreover, misalignment in translation (as seen with “cry wolf”) underscores that understanding the underlying cultural logic is crucial. From a pedagogical standpoint, recognizing these subtleties is essential: language instruction must teach not only literal meanings but also the embodied cultural concepts behind animal expressions.



Conclusion. The comparative analysis confirms that animal metaphors in English and Uzbek idioms serve as fundamental, culturally loaded linguistic units. Both languages exploit the animal domain to encode personality, emotion, and social dynamics, forming conceptual mappings that are partly universal and partly culture-bound. Shared metaphors (e.g. fox for cunning, sheep for conformity) reveal common cognitive patterns, while unique usages (e.g. Uzbek camel = patience, English black sheep = misfit) reflect each society's environmental realities and value systems. Importantly, these findings underline that metaphors are not mere decorative speech. As observed, they act as mirrors of “cultural consciousness,” unveiling social attitudes and collective beliefs. Animal idioms encapsulate enduring lessons and community ideals – from persistence in the Uzbek proverb “it hurar – karvon o‘tar” to the English adage about the dog in the manger – bridging language and culture.

In practical terms, understanding cross-cultural variations in animal metaphor usage can enhance translation accuracy and intercultural empathy. Translators and educators must be aware that a literal rendering often fails to capture the intended meaning without cultural insight. By approaching idiomatic metaphors as culturally embedded phenomena, language teaching can foster deeper intercultural dialogue. Ultimately, studying these expressions helps us appreciate both the universality of human experience and the rich diversity of cultural expression. As one analysis concludes, such metaphors “reveal universal truths about human nature while celebrating the diversity of cultural expression”, highlighting their enduring importance in human communication.

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