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## LANGUAGE-SPECIFIC PRAGMATIC REALIZATIONS OF ZOONYMIC UNITS

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### Abstract

This article examines the language-specific pragmatic realizations of zoonymic units (animal-based lexical items and expressions) in cross-linguistic perspective. Zoonymic units function not only as nominative designations for animals but also as metaphorical, evaluative, and culturally marked pragmatic tools in discourse. The study explores how different languages assign culturally embedded meanings to animal images and how these meanings are pragmatically activated in communication. Drawing upon cognitive linguistics, pragmatics, and cultural semantics, the paper argues that zoonymic expressions reflect national worldviews and sociocultural values, resulting in distinct pragmatic effects across languages.

**Keywords:** Zoonymic units, pragmatics, metaphor, cultural semantics, evaluation, discourse

### Introduction

Zoonymic units—words and expressions derived from animal names—occupy a significant place in the lexical and phraseological systems of many languages. While their literal meaning refers to fauna, their figurative usage reveals complex layers of cultural symbolism and pragmatic intention.

In discourse, zoonymic expressions often function as evaluative markers, intensifiers, insults, compliments, or solidarity signals. However, their pragmatic

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realization varies significantly across languages due to differences in cultural perception, historical experience, and social norms.

This article aims to: define zoonymic units from a pragmatic perspective; examine their metaphorical and evaluative functions; analyze language-specific pragmatic realizations; identify cross-cultural similarities and divergences.

### Literature Review

The study of zoonymic expressions intersects with multiple disciplines, including cognitive linguistics, pragmatics, and cultural semantics. Research on animal metaphors and animal-based lexical units reflects not only linguistic structure but also cultural mentality and communicative function. Early work by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) established the cognitive basis for metaphorical language. In *Metaphors We Live By*, they argue that many human concepts are structured through metaphor anchored in bodily experience. For instance, animal images often function as source domains in conceptual metaphors such as HUMANS ARE ANIMALS or CHARACTER TRAITS ARE ANIMAL BEHAVIORS (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This basic cognitive insight has been widely applied in research on figurative language and lexical pragmatics.

From a linguistic perspective, Wierzbicka's (1992; 1996) work on cultural semantics highlights that lexical meaning is shaped by culturally distinct conceptual systems. In *Semantics, Culture, and Cognition*, Wierzbicka demonstrates how universal concepts are expressed differently across languages due to variations in cultural norms. Zoonymic expressions are thus not merely metaphorical; they encode culturally specific evaluative judgments (Wierzbicka, 1992; 1996). Pragmatics scholars such as Leech (1983) and Yule (1996) have emphasized the role of context in meaning construction. Leech's *Principles of Pragmatics* outlines how evaluate meaning (i.e., judgments of good/bad, positive/negative, praise/insult) is realized through linguistic choices. Zoonymic expressions often function as evaluative or expressive speech acts, carrying

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affective meaning beyond their literal referents (Leech, 1983; Yule, 1996). Searle's (1969) classification of speech acts further explains how such expressions can perform social functions (e.g., insults, praise, warnings) depending on speaker intention and contextual constraints.

In the domain of metaphor research, Gibbs (1994) and Kövecses (2010) contribute important insights into the psychological grounding of figurative language. Gibbs argues that metaphors are not only cognitive but also experiential and interactive (Gibbs, 1994). Kövecses' work on metaphor elaborates on the cultural variability of metaphorical scenarios, reinforcing that animal symbolism is shaped by culturally specific experiences and associations (Kövecses, 2010). Studies focused specifically on zoonymic units are comparatively sparser but highly illustrative of cross-cultural diversity. Mieder (1993; 2004) explores proverbial and phraseological expressions containing animal names, demonstrating how animal imagery encodes moral values, social norms, and cultural worldview in European traditions (Mieder, 1993; 2004). However, most existing research concentrates on single languages or cultural zones, with limited comparative investigation.

In contrast, cross-linguistic studies such as those by Dirven and Pörings (2002) investigate metaphor and culture across languages, suggesting that pragmatic realizations diverge even when underlying conceptual metaphors are shared. Their work supports the thesis that language-specific cultural models influence the pragmatic force of zoonymic expressions (Dirven & Pörings, 2002). Despite foundational work on metaphor and cultural semantics, the pragmatic dimension of zoonymic units remains an underexplored area, particularly from a cross-cultural standpoint. Most research on animal imagery focuses on semantic or cognitive interpretation rather than pragmatic function in discourse. Accordingly, this study contributes to bridging that gap by analyzing how language-specific cultural assumptions shape pragmatic meaning in zoonymic units across languages.

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### Main Part

The study of zoonymic units intersects with several linguistic disciplines:

1. Cognitive Linguistics. According to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By*, metaphor structures human thought. Animal metaphors often conceptualize human traits through embodied experience (e.g., strength as lion-like, cunning as fox-like). Zoonymic expressions operate through conceptual metaphor mechanisms such as:

- HUMAN IS AN ANIMAL
- CHARACTER TRAIT IS ANIMAL BEHAVIOR

2. Pragmatics and Speech Act Theory. From a pragmatic perspective, as outlined by John Searle, meaning is shaped by communicative intention and context. Zoonymic units may function as:

- Expressive speech acts (insults, praise)
- Directive acts (warning, advising)
- Solidarity markers (affectionate nicknames)

Their illocutionary force depends on sociocultural conventions.

3. Cultural Semantics. Anna Wierzbicka emphasizes that lexical meanings are culturally grounded. Animal symbolism differs across linguistic communities, leading to divergent pragmatic interpretations.

### Zoonymic Units as Pragmatic Tools

Zoonymic units can be categorized according to their pragmatic functions:

#### 1. Evaluative Function

Many zoonymic expressions encode positive or negative evaluation.

- Positive: lion (bravery), eagle (vision), horse (strength)
- Negative: snake (treachery), pig (dirtiness), donkey (stupidity)

However, evaluation is language-specific. For example, the image of a dog may symbolize loyalty in English-speaking cultures but may carry negative connotations in other linguistic contexts.

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### 2. Expressive and Emotional Function

Zoonymic terms are frequently used to express emotion:

- Anger (“You snake!”)
- Affection (“my little lamb”)
- Admiration (“He’s a tiger in business.”)

The pragmatic effect depends on intonation, social relationship, and context.

### 3. Irony and Humor

Animal metaphors are often used ironically. Calling a timid person a “lion” may signal sarcasm. Humor emerges from incongruity between literal and figurative meaning.

## Language-Specific Pragmatic Realizations

### 1. Cultural Symbolism

Different cultures attribute distinct symbolic meanings to the same animal.

- Fox: cunning in many European languages.
- Owl: wisdom in Western cultures, but may symbolize misfortune in other traditions.
- Wolf: aggression or danger, yet sometimes independence or freedom.

These symbolic associations shape pragmatic interpretation.

### 2. Sociolinguistic Constraints

The acceptability of zoonymic insults or compliments varies depending on:

- Power relations
- Gender norms
- Age hierarchy
- Formal vs. informal context

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For instance, calling someone “pig” in a formal setting produces a strong face-threatening act, whereas affectionate zoonymic diminutives in family discourse may strengthen solidarity.

### 3. Gendered Pragmatics

Certain zoonymic units are gender-marked. For example:

- “Fox” may imply attractiveness when referring to women.
- “Bull” may imply strength or stubbornness when referring to men.

Language-specific gender stereotypes influence pragmatic interpretation.

Cross-Linguistic comparison of

Although zoonymic metaphors exist universally, their pragmatic realizations are not universal. Differences emerge in:

- Degree of offensiveness
- Cultural taboo status
- Frequency in colloquial speech
- Degree of metaphorical conventionalization

Languages may share structural similarity but differ in pragmatic force. A direct translation of a zoonymic insult may weaken, intensify, or completely alter its communicative impact.

### Discussion

The analysis shows that zoonymic units are culturally loaded pragmatic instruments. Their interpretation requires shared cultural knowledge. Without awareness of language-specific symbolism, miscommunication may occur in intercultural contexts.

Zoonymic expressions reveal how human societies anthropomorphize animals and, in turn, animalize human behavior. This bidirectional mapping reflects deep cognitive and cultural mechanisms.

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The pragmatic realization of zoonymic units depends on:

- Context
- Speaker intention
- Cultural model of the animal
- Social relationship between interlocutors

Therefore, zoonymic units should be studied not merely as lexical items but as dynamic discourse tools embedded in sociocultural frameworks.

### Conclusion

Zoonymic units constitute a powerful intersection of language, culture, and pragmatics. While animal names originate as neutral lexical items, their metaphorical extension generates complex evaluative and expressive meanings. The study demonstrates that pragmatic realizations of zoonymic units are language-specific and culturally conditioned. The same animal image may convey praise in one language and insult in another. These differences highlight the importance of cultural semantics and pragmatic competence in cross-linguistic communication.

Understanding language-specific pragmatic patterns enhances translation accuracy, intercultural awareness, and linguistic theory. Future research should incorporate corpus-based data and experimental pragmatic analysis to further explore contextual variation in zoonymic discourse.

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