



## HOW ANIMAL METAPHORS SHAPE HUMAN THOUGHT

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**Abstract.** *The article examines how animal metaphors structure human thinking, communication and cultural perception. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), it argues that animal-based figurative expressions are not merely stylistic ornaments but cognitive tools that map observable animal traits onto abstract human qualities and social relations. On the basis of examples from English, Malay, Russian and Uzbek, the study shows both cross-linguistic universals (e.g., LION as a symbol of bravery, FOX as a symbol of cunning) and culture-specific meanings (e.g., divergent evaluations of DOG or OWL). Special attention is given to the main functions of animal metaphors in discourse: characterization of personality, encoding of moral lessons in fables and proverbs, creation of humor and irony, and implicit social or political commentary. The article concludes that animal metaphors provide insight into shared cognitive patterns while simultaneously reflecting culturally grounded worldviews, thus demonstrating the close interconnection between language, thought and culture.*

**Key words:** *animal metaphors, conceptual metaphor, human cognition, cross-cultural semantics, figurative language, English, Malay, Russian, Uzbek.*

**Introduction.** *“Every time we call someone ‘busy as a bee’ or ‘sly as a fox,’ we tap into a rich tradition of animal metaphors that shape how we think and speak.”* Metaphors are more than just decorative language – they are fundamental to human cognition, helping us understand abstract ideas through familiar experiences. Among these, animal metaphors are particularly vivid and culturally rich. Animals have been central to human life, providing sustenance, companionship, and symbolic meaning. Linguistically, they serve as powerful tools to describe human traits, behaviors, and social phenomena. This article explores the role of animal metaphors in language, highlighting their cognitive, cultural, and communicative significance across different cultures.

### **Animal Metaphors in Human Cognition**

Cognitive linguists argue that metaphors reflect the way humans think, not just how they speak. According to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), people often understand abstract concepts through more tangible experiences. Animals, being part of everyday life and shared knowledge across cultures, become ideal vehicles for metaphorical thinking. For instance, describing a person as a “fox” evokes cleverness, while calling someone a “lion” implies bravery. These metaphors tap into universal perceptions of animal behavior and project them onto human experiences.

### **Cultural Variations in Animal Metaphors**

Animal metaphors are not universal, they vary across languages and cultures. In English, a “dog” might symbolize loyalty, whereas in some cultures, dogs are associated



## Section-6: Digital Linguistics and Current Trends in Philological Research

with uncleanliness. Similarly, the owl is widely seen as wise in Western cultures, but in certain African or Asian traditions, it may symbolize death or misfortune. Studying animal metaphors in different languages reveals cultural values, social norms, and historical relationships with animals. Such metaphors also illustrate how language encodes human perception of the natural world.

### Functions of Animal Metaphors in Language

Animal metaphors serve multiple linguistic and communicative purposes:

1. **Characterization:** They provide vivid descriptions of personality traits (e.g., “sly as a fox,” “brave as a lion”).
2. **Moral Lessons:** Fables and proverbs use animals to teach ethical or social lessons, such as “The Tortoise and the Hare,” illustrating perseverance versus arrogance.
3. **Humor and Irony:** Metaphorical animal language often carries humor or irony, e.g., calling someone a “chicken” to denote cowardice.
4. **Social Commentary:** Political discourse sometimes employs animal metaphors to critique behavior, such as referring to a manipulative leader as a “wolf in sheep’s clothing.”

### Examples of Animal Metaphors Across Languages

Animal	English	Meaning	Malay	Meaning
Fox	Sly as a fox	Clever, cunning	Licik seperti musang	Clever, tricky
Lion	Brave as a lion	Courageous	Berani seperti singa	Brave, strong
Owl	Wise as an owl	Intelligent, knowledgeable	Bijak seperti burung hantu	Wise
Dog	Loyal as a dog	Loyal, faithful	Setia seperti anjing	Loyal
Snake	Snake in the grass	Deceptive, treacherous	Ular dalam rumput	Deceptive
Bear	Bear hug	Strong, protective	Pelukan beruang	Strong, protective
Chicken	Chicken	Cowardly	Penakut seperti ayam	Coward
Bee	Busy bee	Hardworking, diligent	Sibuk seperti lebah	Hardworking

Russian	Meaning	Uzbek	Meaning
Хитрый как лиса	Cunning, clever	Tulki kabi shayton	Cunning, clever
Храбрый как лев	Brave	Sher kabi jasur	Brave, strong
Мудрый как сова	Wise	Buqo’ri kabi dono	Wise
Верный как собака	Faithful	It kabi sodiq	Loyal
Змея в траве	Deceptive	O’tloqdagi ilon	Deceptive
Медвежье объятие	Protective	Ayiq quchoqlash	Strong, protective

Трус как курица	Coward	Tovuq kabi qo'rqoq	Cowardly
Трудолюбивый как пчела	Hardworking	Asalarichalik mehnatkash	Hardworking

### Cross-Cultural Similarities and Differences

Examining animal metaphors across languages reveals fascinating patterns of both universality and cultural specificity.

#### 1. Universal Traits:

- **Lion:** Across English, Malay, Russian, and Uzbek, lions symbolize bravery and strength, reflecting their shared perception as dominant predators.
- **Fox:** Foxes are consistently associated with cleverness or cunning, mirroring their behavior in nature.

#### 2. Cultural Specificity:

- **Owl:** While English, Malay, Russian, and Uzbek often view owls as wise, other cultures may associate them with misfortune or death.
- **Dog:** In English, dogs are primarily loyal, but in some cultures, dogs may carry negative connotations, demonstrating cultural influence on metaphorical meaning.

#### 3. Diverse Usage:

- Everyday expressions like "busy bee" or "chicken" often carry humorous or colloquial tones.
- In political or literary contexts, metaphors such as "snake in the grass" rely on shared cultural knowledge for critique or commentary.

This comparison shows that while **human cognition often relies on observable animal traits**, cultural factors shape how these traits are expressed linguistically.

### Conclusion

Animal metaphors are a window into human cognition, culture, and communication. They transform familiar natural experiences into tools for understanding human behavior, abstract concepts, and social dynamics. By examining animal metaphors across languages, we gain insight into both universal human thought and culturally specific interpretations. These metaphors demonstrate that language is not merely a neutral tool for communication but a reflection of thought, culture, and imagination.

### Summary

Animal metaphors are more than colorful expressions – they are a reflection of how humans think, communicate, and understand the world. From lions symbolizing bravery to foxes representing cunning, these metaphors reveal both universal human experiences and culturally unique perspectives. They enrich language by adding vivid imagery, humor, and moral lessons, while also offering insight into societal values. By paying attention to the animals in our words, we can better understand ourselves, our cultures, and the intricate ways language shapes thought.

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