A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ANIMAL IDIOMS IN ENGLISH AND OTHER LANGUAGES

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https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19254917

ABSTRACT

This article investigates how animal idioms encode culturally salient evaluations in English compared with Russian and Uzbek. Using a contrastive corpus-based approach and componential semantic analysis, we classified idioms by animal image, pragmatic function, and evaluative polarity. Results show partial overlap in metaphorical mappings but systematic differences in connotation, frequency, and register. The study contributes a principled framework for cross-linguistic idiom equivalence.

INTRODUCTION

Animal-based idioms represent one of the most persistent and culturally informative strata of phraseology because they combine lexical stability with dense evaluative meaning. Within cognitive and cultural linguistics, such idioms are not treated as ornamental expressions but as conventionalized mappings that compress communal experience into a reproducible form. Their relevance for contemporary linguistic research is reinforced by three interrelated factors. First, idioms remain a frequent source of misunderstanding in intercultural communication because their figurative meanings are often non-compositional and heavily dependent on shared cultural knowledge. Second, animal imagery is widespread across languages, yet its semantic load is not uniformly distributed: the same animal

may evoke admiration, ridicule, caution, or taboo, depending on historical experience, folklore, and discourse conventions. Third, applied domains such as translation, lexicography, and language education require reliable criteria to decide when an idiom has a functional equivalent, when it requires paraphrase, and when it should be replaced by a different figurative strategy.

Despite extensive work on metaphor and phraseology, the comparative description of animal idioms still exhibits a methodological gap. Cross-linguistic studies often proceed by enumerating colorful examples or by assuming that shared animals automatically imply shared meanings. Such approaches can obscure systematic asymmetries in evaluative polarity, pragmatic function, and

register. Another limitation is the tendency to focus on English alone, treating other languages as peripheral sources of "equivalents," rather than as systems with their own internal idiomatic organization. For English and Russian, comparative phraseology is relatively developed, but it frequently privileges dictionary equivalence and overlooks corpus-based distribution and contextual constraints. For English and Uzbek, the gap is more pronounced, as available descriptions are commonly fragmented across pedagogical materials and general surveys, making it difficult to propose a unified analytical model that is both empirically accountable and theoretically interpretable.

The present study addresses this gap by conducting a structured comparison of animal idioms in English with corresponding idioms in Russian and Uzbek, emphasizing three dimensions that are central for functional equivalence: semantic composition, pragmatic deployment, and cultural evaluation. The research problem can be formulated as follows: animal idioms are often presumed to be transferable across languages because they share an animal image, yet actual usage reveals mismatches in meaning and communicative effect; without a principled method, these mismatches remain unpredictable for translators and language learners. The aim of the article is to identify regularities and divergences in the metaphorical and evaluative profiles of animal idioms across the selected languages and to propose criteria for distinguishing close equivalents from partial and non-equivalents.

To achieve this aim, the study pursues several objectives. It first establishes an analytical classification of animal idioms by animal image and by semantic-pragmatic function, then examines how the same animal images behave across languages with respect to polarity and register. It further identifies recurrent cross-linguistic patterns of convergence and divergence, focusing on cases where similar meanings are expressed through different animal images and on cases where the same animal image yields contrasting evaluations. Finally, it formulates implications for translation and pedagogical explanation, grounded in observed usage rather than intuition. By integrating phraseological theory, conceptual metaphor research, and contrastive methodology, the study seeks to contribute to a more predictive account of idiom equivalence in multilingual contexts [1; 2].

The methodological framework combines contrastive phraseology with corpus-informed semantic analysis. The study uses English as the anchor language and compares it with Russian and Uzbek to represent two typologically different systems and two distinct phraseological traditions, thereby allowing the analysis to separate universal tendencies in animal metaphor from culturally specific conventions. The core dataset was assembled through a triangulated procedure. First, a seed list of English animal idioms was compiled from authoritative phraseological descriptions and idiom dictionaries, ensuring inclusion of high-frequency and culturally entrenched expressions [3; 4]. Second, candidate equivalents and near-

equivalents in Russian and Uzbek were identified via bilingual lexicographic sources and phraseological reference works, with attention to conventionality rather than literal translatability **[2; 5]**. Third, the idioms were checked for contemporary usage and contextual variability using large electronic corpora and searchable media archives where available; this step was necessary because dictionary presence does not guarantee current productivity, and corpus attestations help reveal register constraints and collocational preferences **[1; 6]**.

Analytically, the study applies componential semantic analysis to model idiom meaning as a structured bundle of features, including the target domain (human trait, social behavior, evaluation of competence, moral judgment), the polarity (positive, negative, ambivalent), and the typical discourse function (insult, warning, praise, self-deprecation, narrative characterization). This feature-based representation is important for cross-linguistic comparison because it avoids reducing equivalence to shared imagery. Alongside componential analysis, the study employs conceptual metaphor and metonymy as interpretive tools, treating animal idioms as conventional mappings from an animal source domain to human behavior, while allowing for culturally mediated reweighting of salient animal attributes **[1]**. Pragmatic analysis is used to identify speech-act tendencies, such as whether an idiom is commonly used for direct face-threatening evaluation or for indirect humorous mitigation.

For comparative mapping, the study distinguishes three types of correspondences. A close functional equivalent is defined as an idiom in another language that matches the English idiom in core meaning, polarity, and typical pragmatic function, even if the animal image differs. A partial equivalent matches the core meaning but differs in evaluative intensity, register, or typical targets. A non-equivalent is a case where an apparently similar animal image misleads because the meaning or pragmatic use diverges. This typology was applied consistently across the dataset, and ambiguous cases were resolved by prioritizing attested usage contexts over isolated dictionary glosses. The chosen methods are appropriate for the research aim because the problem concerns conventional meaning in discourse rather than purely etymological origin; therefore, usage-based validation and pragmatic profiling are essential to avoid overgeneralization **[6; 7]**.

Results

The analysis demonstrates that animal idioms across English, Russian, and Uzbek exhibit both predictable convergence and systematic divergence. At the level of broad semantic domains, convergence is most visible in idioms expressing evaluation of intelligence, diligence, cowardice, aggression, and social hierarchy, suggesting that certain human concerns are routinely projected onto animal behavior across cultures. However, the mapping from animal to trait is not stable in detail: the same animal image can encode different, even opposing, evaluations, and the same evaluation can be encoded through different animals depending on local narrative and symbolic traditions.

A first result concerns the distribution of evaluative polarity. In all three languages, negative evaluation dominates animal idioms that characterize a person, particularly those used as labels or as condensed moral judgments. English idioms such as those invoking a "rat" or "snake" align with Russian phraseology that similarly uses these animals to signal betrayal or danger, indicating a shared tendency to select animals perceived as threatening or socially stigmatized for negative moral categorization **[2; 3]**. Uzbek also employs animal imagery for negative assessment, yet the choice of animals and the intensity of condemnation can differ, with some images functioning more as mild teasing than as severe accusation in everyday interaction. The crucial observation is that polarity is not inherent in the animal image alone; it is stabilized by conventional phraseological patterns and by the communicative norms of criticism and humor in each speech community.

A second result involves asymmetry between shared animal images and shared meanings. The dataset contains numerous cases where English and Russian share an animal but diverge in the associated trait or in typical pragmatic force. For instance, animals associated with cunning or persistence may overlap, but the idiomatic packaging differs: one language may lexicalize the trait as a stable label, while another may express it through a situational idiom that highlights context rather than character. In the English–Uzbek comparison, the asymmetry is more frequently visible in register: some English idioms are colloquial and appear readily in journalistic commentary, while their Uzbek counterparts may be more common in oral narrative or proverbial style, which changes their appropriateness in formal writing. This result shows that equivalence cannot be assumed even where a bilingual dictionary proposes a single matching item; pragmatic embedding is a decisive variable.

A third result concerns the role of domesticated versus wild animals. Idioms involving common domesticated animals, such as dogs, cats, horses, and donkeys, tend to show higher cross-linguistic stability in their availability as sources for metaphor, because these animals occupy a shared experiential base. Nevertheless, the connotations attached to these domesticated animals are not uniform. In English, "dog" idioms can range from affectionate solidarity to derogatory labeling, reflecting a polysemous cultural profile. Russian exhibits a similarly complex profile, but with different conventional collocations and evaluative defaults in certain idioms **[2]**. Uzbek idioms involving work animals often foreground endurance and burden, which can shift the metaphor from moral judgment to social empathy, especially in narratives about labor and hardship. This result suggests that shared everyday experience supports the existence of comparable source domains, yet cultural scripts determine which features become salient and conventionalized.

A fourth result is the prevalence of functional equivalence without imagistic equivalence. Across all three language pairs, many of the closest equivalents do

not preserve the animal image. Instead, they preserve the pragmatic effect, such as warning against naive trust, criticizing opportunism, or praising industriousness. This pattern is particularly important for translation practice: insisting on maintaining the same animal can result in unnatural or misleading output, whereas selecting a different animal idiom that carries the same evaluative and pragmatic profile yields a more faithful communicative rendering. The data show that English often encodes certain social evaluations through compact idioms, while Russian sometimes uses more elaborated phraseological units, and Uzbek may prefer proverb-like constructions; nonetheless, these can be functionally aligned when the feature bundle of meaning matches.

A fifth result identifies a set of high-risk "false friends" among animal idioms. These are cases where the same animal appears in both languages and tempts literal substitution, but the conventional meaning differs. The analysis shows that these mismatches often arise from different cultural narratives around an animal or from historical shifts in symbolism. The practical consequence is that surface similarity is an unreliable indicator of equivalence; translators and learners require diagnostic criteria grounded in polarity, target trait, and discourse function. This result directly supports the study's objective to move from impressionistic comparison to a predictive typology.

Discussion

The findings align with the general theoretical position that idioms are conventionalized conceptualizations rather than transparent metaphors, and that their meaning is stabilized by usage and cultural salience **[1]**. The observed dominance of negative evaluation in person-targeting animal idioms supports the argument in phraseological scholarship that idioms often serve as instruments of social categorization and norm enforcement, condensing complex judgments into brief expressions that are easy to reproduce **[6]**. Yet the cross-linguistic differences in intensity and register indicate that even when languages share a conceptual metaphor, they can differ in the pragmatics of enactment. This refines the common assumption that metaphorical universals automatically yield pragmatic equivalence, showing instead that pragmatic norms mediate the social acceptability of idiomatic judgment.

Comparative phraseology in the Russian tradition emphasizes systemic relations among phraseological units and their stylistic stratification, a perspective that helps explain why apparent semantic matches may fail due to register constraints **[2]**. The present study's results confirm that stylistic marking is not a peripheral property but a core dimension of equivalence. When an English idiom is casual and frequently used in media commentary, a Russian or Uzbek idiom with proverbial or archaic coloring may not function as a true equivalent in the same communicative situation. This observation resonates with approaches that treat phraseological meaning as including a stylistic and evaluative component that must be represented explicitly in lexicography and pedagogy **[5; 7]**. In this sense, the study extends earlier work by

showing how stylistic mismatch is especially common in English–Uzbek pairings, where genre traditions of idiom use differ more sharply.

From a cognitive-linguistic standpoint, the presence of functional equivalence without imagistic equivalence supports the view that what is shared across languages is often the target-domain evaluation rather than the source-domain choice **[1; 3]**. The implication is that animal imagery is a culturally variable vehicle for relatively stable communicative intentions. This does not reduce cultural specificity; rather, it highlights where it operates. Cultural specificity emerges not simply in the presence or absence of animal metaphor, but in which animal becomes the conventional carrier of a particular judgment and in how strongly that judgment is socially sanctioned. The study's identification of high-risk false friends exemplifies this point: the same animal can be recruited for different evaluations because different communities foreground different perceived attributes or narrative roles. Such divergence is consistent with the idea that metaphor selection is constrained by culturally entrenched frames rather than by biological facts about animals **[3; 6]**.

The findings also have implications for translation theory. Classical debates about idiom translation often contrast literal preservation with free paraphrase, but the present results suggest a more nuanced decision procedure grounded in the typology of correspondences. Where a close functional equivalent exists, preserving idiomaticity is feasible and often desirable. Where only partial equivalence exists, the translator must decide which component of meaning is most communicatively relevant: core propositional content, evaluative polarity, or stylistic tone. Where non-equivalence or false friendship is present, paraphrase or a different figurative strategy is preferable to avoid pragmatic distortion. This aligns with views in applied linguistics that emphasize communicative effect and contextual appropriateness over surface similarity **[6; 7]**. For language teaching, the same logic implies that instruction should prioritize pragmatic profiles and typical contexts of use, because learners who acquire only a dictionary gloss may misuse an idiom in a way that violates politeness expectations or genre norms.

At the level of linguistic description, the study contributes by operationalizing equivalence through a feature bundle that includes discourse function, a dimension sometimes underrepresented in purely semantic comparisons. This approach complements established phraseological descriptions by making explicit the criteria that are often implicit in expert intuition. It also suggests a path for improving bilingual dictionaries: instead of offering a single equivalent, lexicographic entries could provide ranked options corresponding to the three correspondence types and include brief notes on polarity and register. Such recommendations are consistent with contemporary calls to integrate corpus evidence and pragmatic labeling into phraseological resources **[1; 6]**. Additionally, the comparative perspective involving Uzbek underscores the importance of expanding idiom research beyond heavily studied

European pairs, because typological and cultural distance reveals dimensions of variation that might be missed in closer language families.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that animal idioms in English, Russian, and Uzbek share broad conceptual domains but diverge systematically in evaluative polarity defaults, stylistic marking, and pragmatic deployment. Equivalence across languages is therefore better predicted by matching a structured bundle of semantic and pragmatic features than by preserving the same animal image. The proposed typology of close, partial, and non-equivalence clarifies why some dictionary-based substitutions succeed while others produce false friends and pragmatic distortion. The findings have practical value for translation, lexicography, and language teaching by motivating context-sensitive selection of idiomatic correspondences and explicit instruction in register and evaluative force. Future research can extend the model to additional languages, incorporate larger balanced corpora, and examine diachronic change to explain how animal symbolism shifts under evolving communicative norms.

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