

ZOO ELEMENTS USED IN ENGLISH PHRASEOLOGY

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Abstract: *Articolul dat are drept scop analiza unităților frazeologice, ce includ în componența sa nume de animale, mai precis sunt analizate două grupe de unități frazeologice cu aceste componente: unități frazeologice, care includ nume de animale domestice și sălbatice. În rezultatul acestui studiu sunt identificate cele mai frecvent utilizate nume de animale în cadrul acestor grupe de frazeologisme, evidențiind importanța lor în plan lingvistic și cultural.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *frazeologisme, unități frazeologice, nume de animale, simbol, plan lingvistic și cultural.*

The understanding of the lexicon of the language demands more than knowing the denotative meaning of words. It requires its speakers to have connotative word comprehension and an understanding of figurative language. Phraseological units (PhUs) fall into this final category. The investigation of phraseology into gives the possibility not only to improve language competence but also to obtain a deeper insight into the culture [6, p. 33].

English zoomorphic phraseology is a very challenging topic and that is why it has been chosen to be treated in the present research. One can find grotesque images and figures in this gallery: dark horses, white elephants, bulls in China shops. Zoomorphic phraseology, which tends to be the second richest group after the somatic one, has been discussed in a number of works over recent decades. Such scholars as Kieltyka R., Rakusan J., Rinkauskaite E., Selmistraitis L., Leasota Y. have tackled this problem. The aim of our research is to explore two semantic groups of zoomor-

phic PhUs, which contain names of domestic and wild animals and to identify the most frequent zoonimic elements used within these groups of phraseologisms.

Phraseology is a developing field of research and has attracted interest from many sides. It is an important and integral part of any language. English is not an exception. As a rule, PhUs describe the mentality, the national character, the lifestyle of people and much more. Animalistic phraseology is a huge layer of PhUs. PhUs with zoo elements reflect the centuries-old observations of a person over the appearance, habits and behavior of animals, they show the attitude of the people to their "smaller brothers". The man, trying to characterize his behavior and appearance, compared himself with what was closest, familiar and similar to himself - the world of animals. That is why words which name animals are widely used by people to represent the picturesque description of the inner world of the man and the peculiarities of his behavior. English PhUs with zoo elements are rich and diverse. Animals, like humans, have their own characteristic habits and peculiar features. Each of them has its own way of life and has a unique type of behavior. In addition, it is interesting for linguists that the names of the same animals can often imply different qualities in different languages, giving people completely opposite characteristics. For instance, in Russian the word *elephant* symbolizes a big, awkward man, while for Indian people it has an opposite meaning: the *elephant* is a symbol of gracefulness. The word *tortoise* in Russian is the symbol of slow movements, but Chinese people use this word to denote an unfaithful wife. PhUs with names of animals are associated with the cultural-national standards and stereotypes which represent the mentality characteristic of a particular culture. PhUs with names of animals are used to make the speech more vivid, brighter and more imaginative.

Many of the somatic PhUs originated from various sources. The English language has a great number of PhUs, which originate from the Bible. Not only separate words, but also completely idiomatic expressions entered the English language from the pages of the Bible. Among them there are many PhUs with zoo elements: the PhU *a leopard never changes its spots* means that "it is impossible for one to change his/her character, even if he/she tries very hard". This meaningful phrase dates back to Old Testament. It was used in Jeremiah 13:23, where the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah had originally said: "*Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots?*" [4, p. 662]. *A leopard never changes its spots* derives directly from that phrase. The PhU *cast pearls before swine* has an ancient origin, it is most often rendered as its negative - *do not cast your pearls before swine*. This PhU means "to offer something very valuable to someone who is unable to appreciate that value". Most often, the phrase is rendered, as an admonition: *Do not cast your pearls before swine* which means, "do not offer what you hold dear to someone who won't appreciate it". The phrase is taken from the New Testament of the Bible, the Sermon on the Mount: "*Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.*" [4, p.845]. Another PhU derived from the Bible is *a wolf in sheep's clothing* which means "someone who seems to be friendly or harmless but is in fact

dangerous and dishonest”. The phrase originates in a sermon by Jesus recorded in the Christian New Testament: “*Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves*” [4, p. 845].

A large number of English PhUs with names of animals are connected with ancient mythology, history and literature. Many of these units are international in nature, as found in a number of languages. The following zoonimic PhU *man is a wolf to man* dates back to ancient mythology. It has meaning in reference to situations where people are known to have behaved in a way comparably in nature to a wolf. Another expression is associated with the Trojan War – *the Trojan Horse* that means “a hidden danger”. It originates from Greek Mythology [2, p. 567].

A number of expressions go back to the fables of Aesop and other Greek tales and fables: e.g. *cry wolf* - “to ask for help when you do not need it, so that people do not believe you when you really need help” (from Aesop’s fable *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*); *the lion's share* refers to the largest part of something (from Aesop’s fable *The Ass in the Lion’s Skin*); *a dog in the manger* - “someone who cannot have or does not need anything, and does not want anyone else to have it” (from Aesop’s fable *De cane invido*) [3].

Some PhUs with names of animals were created by writers. For example, in L. Carroll's book *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* the Cheshire cat says that *a cat may look at a king*. This PhU means that “even a person of low status or importance has rights”. In this case the word *cat* takes on the value of every person. Another PhU - *to grin like a Cheshire cat* means “to smile broadly” [1].

Thus, to achieve the objectives of the present research, we have selected 217 PhUs with domestic and wild zoo elements from the *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* and analyzed them. Out of the whole amount of collected PhUs 125 include names of domestic animals and 92 - names of wild animals. The percentage ratio is 57,6% (names of domestic animals) to 42,4% (names of wild animals).

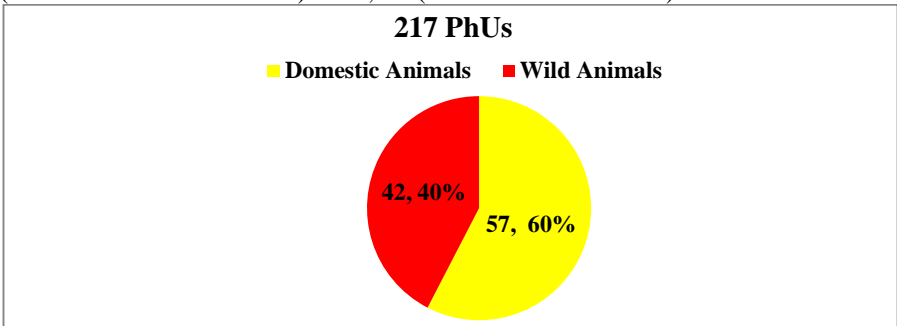


Diagram 1

As it is seen, PhUs containing zoonyms of domestic animals are one of the most numerous and diverse groups. They occupy more than a half of all collected zoonimic PhUs. This may be explained by the fact that people’s life is always closely related with domestic animals. These are animals that live with people and

which are often called “pets”. Their particular habits and individual types of conduct have always had an impact upon people. As it has been mentioned earlier, while marking their own behavior and everyday routine people weighed themselves up with their “smaller brothers”. Probably because of this there exist a variety of PhUs with zoo elements in English and probably in other languages as well.

The data obtained as a result of the analysis of the PhUs containing zoonyms of domestic animals are presented in the following diagram. This group includes PhUs with the following zoonymic elements: *dog, cat, horse, pig, rabbit, cow, sheep, donkey, goat*.

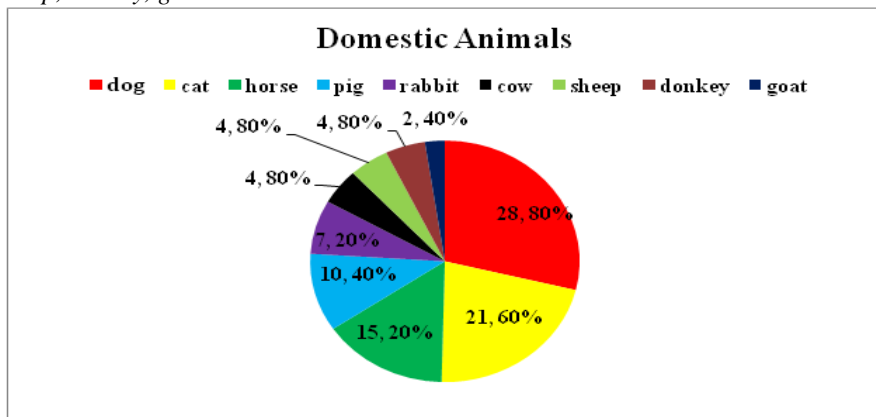


Diagram 2

The data shows that PhUs connected with the zoonym *dog* comprise the biggest part of the analysed PhUs. They make 28, 80% (36 PhUs) out of 125 PhUs with names of domestic animals. Such zoonymic elements as *cat* - 21, 60% (27 PhUs), *horse* - 15, 20% (19 PhUs), *pig* - 10, 40% (13 PhUs) and *rabbit* - 7, 20% (9 PhUs) occupy the second place in frequency. Other animal names are not so numerous. The elements *cow, sheep, and donkey* are used only in 6 collected PhUs that makes per 4, 80%. The element *goat* makes 2, 40% (3 PhUs) out of 125 collected zoonymic PhUs.

The fact that the dog was the first animal to be domesticated and has been the most widely kept as a hunting companion animal in human history explain the fact that PhUs with the zoonym *dog* occupy the biggest part: 28, 80% (36 PhUs). The dog is quite intelligent. This animal is considered as the best friend of the man. In PhUs containing this element we can find good aspects which the word *dog* reflects: e.g. *top dog* - “a person who is successful or dominant in his field”; *work like a dog* - “to work very hard”; *lucky dog* - “an incredibly lucky person”; *die for one dog* - “to be very loyal”. Negative connotations bring ideas about the dog as a persecuted being, dependent on the man, sometimes living in tough conditions. Most of the uses of the word *dog* are pejorative, for example: *to treat like a dog* - “to be unkind to anyone”; *dressed up like a dog's dinner* - “dressed vulgar”; *as sick as a dog* - “extremely ill”; *lead a dog`s life* - “an unhappy existence, full of problems or unfair treatment”.

Rather widely, as well, are represented the PhUs containing the zoonym *cat* (27PhUs - 21, 60%). In the English culture the cat symbolizes an evil, grumpy, unfriendly person, for example *to bell the cat* - "to perform a very dangerous or very difficult task". The cat is the most mysterious of pets and does not give in full domestication. Not without reason the famous image of *a cat that walks by itself* is known. At the same time, the cat has earned the trust and love of the man because of its softness, intelligence and prudence. As a result we have a lot of PhUs with positive connotations: *cool cat* - "also used when talking about someone who is very calm or slow to anger"; *cat's meow* - "something outstanding or excellent"; *as wary as a cat* - "very careful". But being wild animals by nature, cats are particularly cunning and deceitful, for example: *cat in the pan* - "a traitor"; *like a cat on a hot tin roof* - "a way of saying that a person is agitated or extremely nervous and fidgety".

Many PhUs exist in English which are related to hunting and races. The animal often referred to these activities is the horse. Therefore, *a dark horse* is actually not a horse but a person about whom no one knows anything definite, and so, one is not sure what can be expected from him. This zoonymic element is used in 19 PhUs (15, 20%) collected zoonymic PhUs.

A negative attitude is expressed by the element *pig*. It makes 10, 40% (13 PhUs) out of 125 collected zoonyms: *as fat as a pig* - "exceptionally fat"; *buy a pig in a poke* - "to buy something without inspecting it thoroughly, often with negative consequences"; *eat like a pig* - "to eat large quantities of food and/or to eat sloppily". In the 16th century *pig* was applied, usually disagreeably, to a person or other animal due to the characteristics typical of pigs, for example, stubborn, greedy, mean and dirty. In the 19th century, the word was frequently applied to police officers. The word is now almost exclusively applied by London thieves to a plain-clothes man. [5, p. 81].

Finally, it is not so easy to find PhUs with the zoonyms *cow*, *sheep*, *donkey* and *goat*. *Cow*, *sheep*, and *donkey* constitute per 4, 80% (per 6 PhUs) each out of the whole amount of PhUs. The zoonym *goat* occupies only 2, 40% (3 PhUs). One of the most interesting facts here is the semantic development of the word *cow*. In the 16th century, the word was used secondarily with reference to a timid, fainthearted person, a coward. By the end of the 17th century the word started to be applied to a rude or degraded woman, or, loosely, to any woman as a coarse form of address. In the mid-19th century, the word *cow* was pejorated on the evaluative scale to mean "fancy woman". Notice that in Australia and New Zealand *cow* denotes an unwanted person or thing, or a distasteful situation [5, p. 80].

The second group of analyzed PhUs is the group containing zoonymic elements of wild animals. As indicated above, 92 PhUs (42,4%) out of the total number of analyzed zoonymic PhUs belong to this group. These PhUs enclose the following zoonymic elements: *monkey*, *bear*, *tiger*, *fox*, *wolf*, *lion*, *elephant*, *squirrel*, *hare*, and *hedgehog*. In spite of the fact that these animals do not live on the territory of the United Kingdom, the fact that the English language is widely used in the former British colonies and other countries, these names of animals can be found in

English phraseological units. The analysed zoonyms of wild animals are also used not equally in number. Following *Diagram 3* we can observe the most and least frequent zoonymic elements of wild animals.

According to this diagram we can see that people use more often the names *monkey*, *bear*, and *tiger* in PhUs. One reason behind this is the distinctive feature of these animals or the likeness in their behavior and the people's behavior. Thus, the zoonym *monkey* is used in 23 PhUs and occupies the biggest part in this group with the percent ratio of 25%. The *monkey* is compared with people because of the similarities in appearance and behavior with the man. The association with monkeys is usually negative. Being called a *monkey* does not bode well. The association with a *monkey* can mean foolishness, aggravation, environmental terrorism, and even cold. These connotations are generally used in PhUs: *monkey business* - "bad or dishonest behavior"; *monkey see, monkey do* - "someone has slavishly imitated another, especially in doing something foolish"; *monkey's uncle* - "an expression of surprise or amazement". However, there are cases when the use of the word *monkey* cannot be explained, because in these PhUs it does not carry any associations with this animal, for example: *brass-monkey weather*, which means "extremely cold weather". In this case, it is really hard to explain why this zoonym is used.

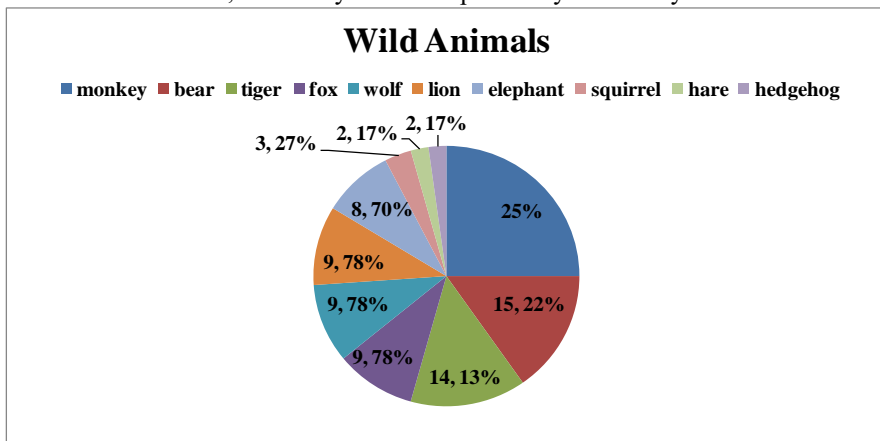


Diagram 3

Quite often we meet English PhUs containing the zoonym *lion*. The lion is among the most ferocious animals. *Lion* is used in 9, 78% (9 PhUs), forever being a symbol of strength, power and boldness. In the PhU *lion-hearted*, which means "very brave", we can find all features of this animal. People find it dangerous and this feature can be seen in the following PhUs: *in the lion's den* - "a dangerous or threatening place or situation"; *have one's head in the lion's mouth* - "in great danger"; *to beard the lion* - "to confront a danger, to take a risk, especially for the sake of possible person gain". The least frequently used zoonyms are *hare* and *hedgehog* - 2,17% (2 PhUs).

Finally, we can state that zoonimic elements are widely used in English phraseology. They form a rich group of PhUs. These units are formed on the basis of a person's idea of an animal, and the name of the animal is consequently associated with an object that has certain qualities and properties. So, the most often used names of animals take on a symbolic value. In other words, a number of names of animals become symbols that focus on various characteristics of a person. It is natural that these symbols penetrate the language of a certain culture making it richer and more vivid in expression. They are signs of cultural, linguistic, geographical, ethnic and social identity.

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