

Associative Meanings of Animals in the Linguistic Consciousness of Kazakh, English, and Chinese Speakers: A Comparative Study of Idioms and Proverbs

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Abstract—This article examines and compares the associative meanings of animal-related lexical items that possess culturally marked connotations and are actively used in everyday communication in Kazakh, English, and Chinese. The analyzed lexical units are classified into three groups: (1) words with similar cultural connotations; (2) words with different or even opposite cultural connotations; and (3) words that share the same conceptual meaning but carry cultural connotations in one language while lacking them in another. The study identifies pig, snake, and rooster as animals with identical or similar cultural connotations across the three languages; dog, owl, cat, and bat as animals with divergent cultural connotations; and ostrich, silkworm, crane, fish, Bactrian camel, and locust as animals whose cultural connotations are present in some languages but absent in others. The associative meanings of these lexical items are analyzed comparatively, revealing both similarities and differences. Furthermore, the cultural connotations of animal-related words in Kazakh, English, and Chinese are substantiated through idiomatic expressions, set phrases, and proverbs. The primary aim of the study is to enhance mutual understanding between different peoples and cultures and to help overcome communicative difficulties. In addition, the research contributes to the development of ethnolinguistics, cognitive linguistics, linguocultural studies, paralinguistics, and pragmalinguistics by offering a comprehensive and modern approach to language analysis.

Index Terms—associative meanings, linguistic consciousness, Kazakh, English, Chinese

I. INTRODUCTION

The anthropocentric paradigm, which examines language in close connection with cognition, culture, and national identity, has significantly influenced the development of modern linguistics. This shift has led to the emergence and advancement of new linguistic disciplines and has broadened the scope of linguistic research. Alongside structural linguistics, which established fundamental theoretical principles, contemporary linguistics increasingly focuses on language as an integral part of individual and ethnic cognition, mental activity, and spiritual experience.

Fields such as ethnolinguistics, cognitive linguistics, linguocultural studies, paralinguistics, and pragmalinguistics have opened new opportunities for a holistic and innovative exploration of language. Within these approaches, one of the key areas of cognitive linguistics involves the study of metaphorization and symbolization processes in language, as well as the classification and comparative analysis of metaphorical and symbolic lexical units across different languages. This line of research is of particular interest not only to linguists but also to scholars in anthropology and social sciences.

The associative meanings of animal-related lexical items are closely linked to each nation's cultural perception and understanding of animals. In this study, we compare idiomatic expressions and associative meanings related to animals

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in Kazakh, English, and Chinese. The Kazakh language reflects the worldview of a people historically rooted in nomadic pastoralism across the Eurasian steppe, tracing back to ancient Saka, Hun, and Turkic civilizations. In contrast, Chinese culture is shaped by centuries of sedentary agricultural traditions, while English represents Western European cultural heritage.

The article analyzes animal-related words and word combinations with associative meanings in Kazakh, English, and Chinese through a comparative lens. Although associative meanings have been extensively studied within individual languages, there remains a need for comparative research involving languages that differ significantly in cultural background, environment, and linguistic structure. Investigating cultural connotations across diverse ethnic groups and comparing linguistic features shaped by history, culture, customs, and religious beliefs helps identify both similarities and differences, thereby fostering intercultural understanding.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze linguistic units within the interconnected framework of “human–language–culture–society–communication” and to explore shared lexical items from semantic and linguocultural perspectives.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Although a considerable body of scholarly research has been devoted to concepts denoting culturally connoted lexical units, terminological uniformity has not yet been achieved. Newmark (2010) refers to such units as cultural words, Baker (1992) uses the term culture-specific concepts, Nord (1997) introduces the notion of cultureme, Gambier (2007) employs the term culture-specific references, Davies (2003) refers to them as culture-specific items, while Bulgarian scholars Vlahov and Florin (1980) define them as realia. In both domestic and international research traditions, when cultural vocabulary is discussed, a wide range of related terms is also employed, including non-equivalent vocabulary, exotic lexis (exotisms), localisms, alienisms, ethnographisms, background words, connotative words, words with a connotative component, barbarisms, and lacunae.

Kazakh scholars have examined Kazakh idioms from the perspectives of lexicology, etymology, grammar, lexicography, and translation studies. Contemporary research on Kazakh idioms addresses issues such as their distinction from other linguistic phenomena, the formation of idiomatic meaning, internal structure, the relationship between phraseology and synonymy, stylistic features of idioms, individual authorial usage, part-of-speech affiliation, and idiomatic variation. In selecting Kazakh lexical material, sources such as the National Corpus of the Kazakh Language (2024), the encyclopedia *The Traditional System of Ethnographic Categories, Concepts, and Names of the Kazakh People* (2011), and Qaidar's (2013) ethnolinguistic dictionary *The World of the Kazakh Native Language* were consulted. In Kazakh linguistic scholarship, the cognitive function of language within the structure of ethnocultural nominations is also reflected in works such as *The Cultural and Cognitive Dictionary of the Kazakh Language* (2023) and similar studies.

Chinese linguists and researchers have conducted extensive and in-depth studies of Chinese idioms across various theoretical frameworks and analytical levels. Chinese idioms are generally characterized as fixed expressions consisting predominantly of four characters, possessing a stable structure and holistic meaning, in which the constituent characters cannot be freely replaced or altered. For the selection of Chinese lexical material, authoritative sources were used, including *The Dictionary of Chinese Idioms* (2024) published by the Commercial Press, containing over 10,000 idiomatic expressions, *The Xinhua Dictionary* (2024), *A Chinese–English Dictionary of Idioms* (2024), and works on Linguoculturology (2023). It is well known that English and Chinese are among the most widely used languages in the world, both in terms of the number of speakers and their global functional domains (Jiao et al., 2010; Li et al., 2016; Lin & Leonard, 2012; Yule, 2017; Wang, 2022). Due to rapid integration processes in the global economy, trade, education, and infrastructure, the number of people learning English and Chinese continues to increase. In recent years, Kazakh linguists and researchers have increasingly turned their attention to comparative studies of the Kazakh language in relation to typologically and culturally different languages, thereby expanding the scope of contrastive and linguocultural research.

III. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative comparative research design grounded in linguocultural and cognitive linguistic approaches. The primary objective is to identify, classify, and interpret the cultural connotations of animal-related lexical units in Kazakh, English, and Chinese, with particular attention to their associative meanings as manifested in idioms, proverbs, fixed expressions, and figurative usages.

The research material consists of animal names and animal-based idiomatic expressions selected from authoritative lexicographic and corpus sources in the three languages. For Kazakh, the data were drawn from the National Corpus of the Kazakh Language, ethnolinguistic dictionaries, cultural and cognitive dictionaries, and collections of proverbs and sayings. English data were collected from idiom dictionaries, phraseological reference works, and linguistic textbooks. Chinese data were extracted from large-scale idiom dictionaries, explanatory dictionaries, linguocultural studies, and online idiom databases. Only stable and widely attested lexical units with clear associative or figurative meanings were included in the analysis (Chinese idioms database).

The methodological framework integrates several complementary methods. First, the descriptive method was used to identify and systematize animal-related lexical units and to provide semantic descriptions of their meanings in each language. Second, the comparative and contrastive method served as the core analytical tool, enabling the comparison of

identical or similar animal names across the three languages in order to reveal convergences and divergences in their cultural connotations (Anderson & Pelteret, 2012; Ayto, 2020; Ji, 2013). Third, semantic analysis was applied to distinguish between conceptual (denotative) meaning and associative (connotative) meaning, allowing for the identification of culturally motivated semantic extensions. Fourth, elements of linguocultural analysis were employed to interpret the identified connotations in relation to historical experience, traditional worldview, belief systems, customs, and symbolic practices of each linguistic community.

In addition, the study draws on cognitive linguistic principles, particularly the notions of conceptual metaphor and association, to explain how human perception of animal characteristics is mapped onto abstract human qualities and social behavior. The classification of animal names into three groups— (1) words with identical or similar cultural connotations, (2) words with different or opposite cultural connotations, and (3) words with identical conceptual meaning but culture-specific connotations present in one language and absent in another—was carried out inductively on the basis of the analyzed data.

To ensure analytical reliability, examples were cross-checked across multiple sources, and only recurrent and culturally conventionalized usages were considered. Contextual interpretation was applied to avoid isolated or idiosyncratic readings. The analysis is synchronic in focus, although diachronic observations are incorporated where necessary to clarify the origin and development of specific connotations.

Overall, the chosen methodological approach makes it possible to reveal both universal and culture-specific patterns in the associative meanings of animal names and to demonstrate how linguistic semantics reflects broader ethnocultural cognition and value systems.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Associative meaning constitutes one of the most distinctive types of lexical meaning actively functioning in communicative contexts. It reflects not only the denotative content of a word but also culturally embedded emotional, evaluative, stylistic, and contextual nuances that arise through collective experience.

The system of anthroponyms in a language provides valuable evidence of the material and cultural life of a people and is inherently saturated with cultural connotations. In Kazakh culture, a significant proportion of personal names are closely connected with traditional pastoral life and livestock breeding. Examples include Bota, Botaköz, Nartai, Aknar, Ögizbai, Sıyrbai, Tekebai, Qoshqarbai, Burabai, Buqabai, Aqqozy, Qulynshaq, Zhylqybai, Zhylqyaildar, Zhylqybek, Qozy, Qozybaq, Qoibagar, Taishyq, Zhamantai, Taizhan, Qunanbai, Qunantai, Dönentai, and others. In addition, some personal names derive from dairy products associated with livestock, such as Airanbai and Süttibai. Beyond anthroponymy, Kazakhs affectionately address small children using diminutive forms derived from animal offspring, such as Qulynym (“my foal”), Botam (“my camel calf”), and Qozym (“my lamb”). This linguistic practice of equating one’s child with the offspring of domesticated animals is culturally meaningful and deeply rooted in the Kazakh worldview. Such usage, however, is not observed in English or Chinese linguistic traditions.

In Chinese culture, affectionate address toward children may involve expressions such as 猪猪, 小猪, or 猪娃 (“piglet,” “little pig,” “my piglet”), which carry positive and endearing connotations. Moreover, individuals born in the Year of the Pig are often given personal names that are phonologically or graphically associated with the character 猪 (pig), such as 诸桦, 诸华, 诸哲, 诸丽, 诸嫣, 诸然, 诸福, 诸莉, 诸娟, and 诸磊. In contrast, in Kazakh culture, the pig is strongly negatively marked: children are never named after pigs, pork is not consumed, and the animal itself is culturally rejected. This negative perception is influenced both by the notion of impurity traditionally associated with pigs and by the prohibitions of Islam.



Figure 1. The Image of a Dragon in the Chinese Ghost



Figure 2. The Image of a Dragon in the Ghost of Westerners



Figure 3. The Image of the Dragon in the Ghost of the Kazakhs

Another illustrative example of culturally divergent associative meaning is the image of the dragon (Fig. 1). The dragon is a widely attested figure in the folklore of many nations, yet its symbolic interpretation varies significantly. In Chinese cultural imagination, the dragon is depicted as a composite creature combining features such as a horse-like face, ox horns and ears, a snake-like body, fish scales, and eagle claws. In Chinese culture, the dragon symbolizes wealth, power, strength, benevolence, and prosperity and serves as a national symbol as well as an emblem of imperial authority. This positive symbolism is reflected in idiomatic expressions such as 望子成龙 (“to hope one’s son becomes successful,” literally “to hope one’s son becomes a dragon”) and 真龙天子 (“the true son of heaven,” literally “the true dragon”). The Chinese people traditionally regard themselves as descendants of the dragon, which explains why more than 300 idiomatic expressions in Chinese are centered around the concept of the dragon [15].

In Western cultural traditions (Fig. 2), by contrast, the dragon is predominantly associated with evil, violence, cruelty, and destruction. It is imagined as a fire-breathing, terrifying, and aggressive monster, often resembling a giant winged lizard. The motif of a hero or prince slaying a dragon is recurrent in Western folklore and mythology. In the biblical tradition, the dragon is interpreted as a symbol of sin and rebellion against God, with Satan being referred to as “the great dragon.” In English, the word dragon carries connotations of ferocity and anger, while expressions such as the old dragon may metaphorically denote the devil.

The Kazakh perception of the dragon largely coincides with the Western interpretation. In Kazakh folklore, the aidahar is portrayed as a gigantic, often multi-headed predator representing a destructive force that imposes heavy tributes on the people (Fig. 3). It is depicted as arriving with storms and devastation, devouring livestock and humans alive, particularly young women, and even threatening to consume a king’s daughter. In heroic narratives, a brave warrior enters the dragon’s body armed with a sword, slays it from within, and liberates the people, cutting a strip from its back as proof of victory. These narratives indicate that the image of the dragon in Kazakh culture has undergone its own stage-based development while retaining a predominantly negative evaluation. This perception is also reflected in idiomatic expressions such as to survive the dragon’s jaws (to escape death) and to bewitch like a dragon (to intimidate or deceive). In Kazakh dream interpretation, riding a dragon signifies the subjugation of enemies. Additionally, in metaphorical geopolitical discourse, Kazakhs sometimes refer to China as a dragon, describing Kazakhstan as a country situated between the Bear (Russia) and the Dragon (China).

Associative meaning can thus be understood as a complex aggregate of emotional, stylistic, reflective, and collocational meanings. This aggregate arises from associations grounded in the conceptual meaning of words. Such meanings often cause misunderstanding and communicative failure, sometimes leading to serious consequences. For this reason, one of the most challenging aspects of translation is the accurate rendering of associative meaning. Associative meaning is closely tied to a nation’s customs, beliefs, and cultural traditions. Since people live in different natural environments and

sociocultural contexts, the same object or phenomenon may evoke divergent associations in different linguistic communities. Understanding these culturally conditioned associations is therefore a crucial prerequisite for successful intercultural communication and translation.

A. Words With Identical or Similar Cultural Connotations

In the life experience of different ethnic groups, both shared and divergent patterns can be observed in the perception and interpretation of objects and phenomena. A considerable number of idiomatic expressions in languages emerge from observations of animals' natural characteristics. Through long-term interaction with and observation of animals, humans have attributed various associative meanings to them. Associative meaning is closely connected with concrete life experience and objective reality. Linguocultural meanings embedded in nationally marked lexical units tend to be preserved over centuries. On the basis of shared human experience and collective emotional perception, linguistic units may develop in two or more languages whose associative meanings are highly similar or even identical.

One illustrative example is pig (Chinese 猪, Kazakh шошқа). In Kazakh, Chinese, and Western cultures alike, the pig is commonly associated with laziness and filth. Consequently, lexical units and idiomatic expressions involving this animal often carry strong negative and derogatory emotional overtones. In Chinese, expressions such as 肥得像头猪 (“fat like a pig”), 猪猡 (“a real pig”), 猪头阿三 (“pig-headed fool”), and 懒得像头猪 (“lazy like a pig”) are all grounded in this negative cultural perception.

Comparable usages are found in English. Idioms and expressions such as pigs might fly, this place is a pigsty, cast pearls before swine, to make a pig's ear of something (to spoil something), as drunk as a sow, as a hog on ice (clumsy), make a pig of oneself, and to be a pig about something all portray the pig as greedy, dirty, ill-mannered, or morally flawed. Similarly, in Kazakh, proverbs and fixed expressions such as шошқадай қорсылдай (“to grunt like a pig”), ит жоқта шошқа үреді қорада (“when there is no dog, the pig barks in the yard”), шошқаға ерген балшыққа аунап (“who follows a pig will wallow in mud”), and ит аулақта доңыз төбеге шығады convey negative evaluations, reinforcing the pig's unfavorable cultural image.

Another example is snake (Chinese 蛇, Kazakh жылан). In the Biblical tradition, the snake is portrayed as a symbol of evil for tempting Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, after which it was expelled from Eden. This negative symbolism is reflected in English expressions such as to snake one's way through (to move in a dangerous or deceitful manner) and a snake in one's bosom, denoting a treacherous person who betrays trust. In Kazakh, the expression сұры жылан refers to a cruel and malicious individual, while the curse жағына жылан жұмыртқаласын represents one of the strongest forms of malediction, implying death. Traditional Kazakh beliefs also held that snakes might lay eggs in the mouths of the deceased, further reinforcing their ominous image. Numerous Kazakh proverbs reflect this perception, including warnings such as қарап жатқан жыланның құйрығын баспа (“do not step on the tail of a resting snake”) and ордалы жыланмен ойнама (“do not play with a nest of snakes”). In Chinese as well, the snake often symbolizes treachery and cruelty (阴险、狠毒), indicating a shared negative associative meaning across the three cultures.

The cock (Chinese 鸡, Kazakh әтеш) provides an example of positive or neutral shared symbolism. The rooster's most salient feature is its crowing at dawn, awakening people and announcing the morning. Accordingly, in all three languages, the rooster is associated with the arrival of day. Chinese idioms such as 闻鸡起舞 and 雄鸡一唱天下白 emphasize diligence and the coming of dawn, while English uses expressions like cockcrow to denote early morning. In Kazakh, the proverb “Әтешке шақыр десең, таң атсын дейді” similarly reflects the rooster's role as a herald of dawn.

Beyond these examples, many idiomatic comparisons based on animals display striking semantic convergence across Kazakh, English, and Chinese. Expressions such as as timid as a mouse / 胆小如鼠 / “тышқан сияқты қорқақ,” kill two birds with one stone / 一石二鸟 / “бір таспен екі құсты ұрып алу,” a wolf in sheep's clothing / 披着羊皮的狼 / “қой терісін жамылған қасқыр,” as gentle as a lamb / 温柔如羔羊 / “қозыдай момақан,” as fast as a hare / 动若脱兔 / “қоян сияқты жылдам,” as busy as a bee / 蜜蜂般忙碌 / “ара сияқты еңбекқор,” as sly as a fox / 狐狸般狡猾 / “түлкі сияқты айлакер,” as graceful as a swan / 优雅如天鹅 / “аққу сияқты сұлу,” and as light as a butterfly / 如蝴蝶般轻盈 / “көбелек сияқты жеңіл” demonstrate a high degree of cross-linguistic similarity.

The shared associative meanings of these idioms stem from common human perceptions of animal characteristics: the speed of the hare, the industriousness of the bee, the gentleness of the lamb, the cruelty and greed of the wolf, the cunning of the fox, the purity and grace of the swan, the lightness of the butterfly, the strength of the bull, the filth associated with the pig, the venom and danger of the snake, the rooster's role as a herald of dawn, and the timidity of the mouse. These perceptions appear to be largely universal, resulting in similar associative meanings across languages.

Linguocultural differences in language generally arise from the customs, values, modes of thinking, and cognitive frameworks of different ethnic groups. Consequently, idioms in which animals function as key components may develop divergent associative meanings. In some cases, the conceptual (or rational) meaning of a lexical unit may be identical across languages, while its associative meaning differs significantly or even becomes completely opposite.

B. Words With Different or Even Opposite Cultural Connotations

In some cases, the same animal may evoke multiple connotations even within a single language, while in other languages its associative meaning may differ significantly or become completely opposite. These discrepancies are rooted in cultural traditions, belief systems, and historically shaped value orientations.

The lexeme dog (Chinese 狗, Kazakh ит) demonstrates striking cross-cultural divergence. In Western cultures, the dog is widely regarded as a loyal companion and a faithful friend of humans. Consequently, many English expressions involving dog carry positive or affectionate connotations, such as puppy love (first love), love me, love my dog, a lucky dog (a fortunate person), a jolly dog (a cheerful person), a top dog (a dominant or successful individual), a clever dog (a smart child), and old dog (an experienced person). In these contexts, the dog symbolizes loyalty, friendliness, and social success.

In Chinese, however, lexical units containing 狗 predominantly express contempt, treachery, cowardice, baseness, or cruelty. Expressions such as 狗汉奸 (“traitorous dog”), 走狗 (“running dog; lackey”), 狐朋狗友 (“friends like foxes and dogs,” i.e., immoral companions), 狼心狗肺 (“wolf’s heart, dog’s lungs,” meaning ruthless and ungrateful), 狗胆包天 (“dog-like audacity”), 狗仗人势 (“to bully others by relying on power”), 狗头军师 (“dog-headed strategist,” an incompetent adviser), 狗急跳墙 (“even a dog will jump over a wall when cornered”), and 狗嘴里吐不出象牙 (“no ivory comes out of a dog’s mouth,” i.e., no good words from a bad person) all reflect a strongly negative associative meaning.

In Kazakh culture, the dog occupies an ambivalent yet culturally significant position. On the one hand, the dog is considered one of the “seven treasures” (jeti qazyna), symbolizing wealth and protection. Numerous Kazakh proverbs emphasize the dog’s loyalty and usefulness, such as “A good dog is its owner’s eyes and ears” and “The dog runs for its owner, the bird flies for its food.” On the other hand, negative or ironic shades are also present in certain contexts, for example in proverbs highlighting neglect or disorder. This dual evaluation indicates that, unlike in Chinese, the dog in Kazakh culture is not exclusively negatively marked, but rather occupies a culturally complex and multifaceted position. It is noteworthy that the Kazakh language contains nearly 800 proverbs and sayings involving the word dog [16], underscoring its cultural salience.

Another example of divergent connotations is owl (Chinese 猫头鹰, Kazakh үкі). In English, the owl is commonly associated with wisdom and intelligence, as reflected in expressions such as as wise as an owl. In Western fairy tales and folklore, the owl often appears as a fair and wise judge who resolves disputes among animals, and characters frequently seek its advice. This symbolism can be traced back to Greek mythology, where the goddess Athena, the embodiment of wisdom, is associated with the owl as her sacred symbol.

In Chinese culture, by contrast, the owl is perceived as an ominous and frightening creature. It is believed to bring misfortune and disaster, and its nocturnal calls are associated with death. Proverbs such as 夜猫子进宅, 无事不来 (“when an owl enters a house at night, it is never without cause”) and 夜猫子抖翅, 大小有点事 (“when an owl flaps its wings at night, trouble is coming”) reflect this belief. In Chinese folklore, it is commonly thought that whoever hears an owl’s call first, or the tree on which the owl lands, foretells death. As a result, the owl symbolizes illness, calamity, and misfortune, and people traditionally avoid it.

In Kazakh culture, however, the owl (үкі) is regarded as a sacred and protective bird. The use of owl feathers as ornaments in traditional clothing is deeply symbolic. The soft texture, distinctive coloration, and aesthetic appeal of owl feathers are believed to enhance beauty and bring good fortune. The owl’s ability to see in the dark and fly silently—qualities absent in many other birds—have contributed to its sacred status. Kazakhs traditionally believe that “the owl has a protective spirit, and evil forces fear it.” To ward off the evil eye, owl beaks or claws are sometimes used as amulets for children, while feathers are attached to cradles, headgear, musical instruments, decorative textiles, and the clothing of young men and women. The custom of үкі тағу (attaching an owl feather) also marks the first stage of betrothal, symbolizing protection and future prosperity. Personal names such as Üki, Ükilai, and Ükibai further attest to the owl’s positive cultural value. Numerous idiomatic expressions and fixed comparisons in Kazakh, such as үкідей ұшы (“to arrive very quickly”) and екі иығына екі үкі тағып (“to praise excessively”), reflect this favorable perception. The widespread metaphorical use of үкі indicates its close association with humans and its status as a benevolent, sacred bird in Kazakh worldview.

The lexeme cat (Chinese 猫, Kazakh мысық) also illustrates partial divergence. In English, idioms such as rain cats and dogs, an old cat (an irritable woman), and alley cat (a promiscuous person) carry figurative or negative connotations. In Chinese, the cat functions largely as a neutral linguistic symbol and lacks strong cultural connotations beyond its literal meaning. In Kazakh, however, the cat tends to be negatively evaluated in figurative usage, as seen in expressions such as мысық тілеулі адам (“a malicious or treacherous person”) and мысық жоқта тышқан төбеге шығады (“when the cat is away, the mice will climb the roof”).

A particularly striking example of opposite connotations is bat (Chinese 蝠, Kazakh жарқанат). In English, the bat is typically associated with blindness, ugliness, madness, and evil. Expressions such as as blind as a bat, crazy as a bat, He’s a bit batty, and have bats in the belfry portray mental instability or irrationality. Influenced by legends of blood-sucking bats, Western culture often associates bats with witches, darkness, and death, and a bat entering a house is traditionally viewed as an ominous sign.

In Chinese culture, however, the bat carries a strongly positive connotation. The character 蝠 (bat) is homophonous with 福 (happiness, good fortune), which has led to its symbolic association with luck, health, and prosperity. Bat images

are frequently used in New Year decorations and placed on doors and windows, as it is believed that doing so will attract happiness and wealth into the household.

These examples demonstrate that even when the conceptual meaning of an animal is shared across languages, its associative meaning may vary significantly depending on cultural context, and in some cases may be entirely reversed. Such contrasts highlight the importance of considering linguocultural factors in semantic analysis, translation, and intercultural communication.

C. Words With Identical Conceptual Meaning but Culture-Specific Connotations Present in One Language and Absent in Another

In some cases, animal names share the same conceptual (denotative) meaning across languages, yet possess rich cultural connotations in one language while remaining culturally neutral in another. Such asymmetry is largely conditioned by differences in natural environment, social organization, economic activities, belief systems, and religious traditions, which inevitably shape distinct modes of perception and interpretation of the same animal among different ethnic groups.

In Kazakh, English, and Chinese, a number of animal names demonstrate this phenomenon clearly. Certain animals carry strong cultural symbolism in one linguistic tradition, while in others they lack any connotative extension beyond their literal meaning. For instance, in Kazakh culture, affection toward children is commonly expressed through metaphorical address using the names of animal offspring, such as Qulynym (“my foal”), Botam (“my camel calf”), and Qozym (“my lamb”). This type of linguistic behavior is absent in English and Chinese and is closely linked to the nomadic pastoral lifestyle of the Kazakh people. Even greeting formulas such as “Mal-jan aman ba?” (“Are your livestock and family well?”) demonstrate the central role of livestock as a guarantee of survival and prosperity in Kazakh life.

Another striking example is the crow. In contemporary perception, the black crow is often considered unpleasant or ominous; however, traditional Kazakh worldview associated it with positive expectations. The idiom “Meniñ qolyma da qarğa tyshar” (“even a crow may defecate on my hand”) expresses hope for future wealth and good fortune. Moreover, the expressions qarğa tamyrlı qazaq (“Kazakh bound by crow-like kinship”) and the affectionate address qarğam (“my dear”) suggest that the crow may once have functioned as a totemic bird in Kazakh culture. Such symbolic meanings of the crow are absent in English and Chinese.

A similar contrast is observed in the perception of the wolf. In English and Chinese, the wolf is predominantly associated with cruelty, aggression, and hostility, whereas in Kazakh culture the Kökböri (Blue Wolf) occupies a sacred and emblematic position. Kazakhs traditionally regard themselves as descendants of the Blue Wolf, which symbolizes wisdom, bravery, perseverance, and strength. Traces of this sacralization are preserved in language, folklore, and ritual practices. Until recently, the wolf’s name was often avoided, replaced by euphemisms such as it-qus, tik qulaq, kara qulaq, ulyma, serik qulaq, and kökjal. The wolf was referred to as “Täñir serisi” (“the companion of Tengri”), and livestock killed by wolves was often consumed without fear, as it was believed to be touched by sacred power. Encounters with wolves were interpreted as good omens, and various protective rituals involving wolf teeth, bones, or talismans were practiced to safeguard children and ensure fertility. In Kazakh discourse, a brave hero is still metaphorically described as “nağyz kökjal” (“a true blue wolf”).

The English word wolf, derived from Old English wulf and attested across early Germanic languages, conveys the animal’s wild and powerful nature. While its associative meaning in English partially overlaps with the Kazakh perception in terms of strength and untamed force, it lacks the deep sacral and totemic dimension characteristic of Kazakh culture. In Chinese, by contrast, the wolf consistently symbolizes cruelty, greed, and evil, as reflected in idioms such as 声名狼藉 (“notorious like a wolf”), 如狼似虎 (“as cruel as wolves and tigers”), 狼狈为奸 (“colluding like wolves and jackals”), 狼吞虎咽 (“to devour like a wolf and a tiger”), and 羊贪狼狠 (“wolfishly cruel”).

The ostrich (Chinese 鸵鸟, Kazakh түйеқыс) provides another illustrative case. While the ostrich is conceptually understood in all three languages as a large, fast-running bird incapable of flight, its cultural connotations differ. In English, ostrich is associated with cowardice, avoidance, and excessive appetite. Expressions such as ostrich belief, to bury one’s head in the sand like an ostrich, an ostrich policy, and have the digestion of an ostrich metaphorically refer to self-deception, denial of reality, or excessive tolerance. In Chinese, the ostrich is perceived merely as a bird that can run but not fly, and the expression 鸵鸟政策 (“ostrich policy”) is a direct calque from English. In Kazakh, the ostrich lacks any notable cultural connotation.

The crane (Chinese 鹤) occupies a highly symbolic position in Chinese culture, where it represents longevity and immortality. Parents may name their children using expressions such as 鹤年 (“crane year”) or 鹤龄 (“crane age”) to wish them long life, and gifts decorated with crane motifs are commonly presented on the birthdays of elderly people. In English and Kazakh cultures, however, the crane does not possess comparable symbolic or connotative meaning.

Similarly, the silkworm (Chinese 蚕) carries strong positive cultural symbolism in China, reflecting the country’s long history of silk production. The proverb 春蚕到死丝方尽, 蜡炬成灰泪始干 (“The silkworm spins silk until death; the candle burns to ashes before its tears dry”) metaphorically praises selfless dedication and tireless labor. Such connotations are entirely absent in Kazakh and English.

The camel (Chinese 骆驼, Kazakh нар түйе) is another culturally marked animal. In Kazakh worldview, the camel symbolizes strength, endurance, dignity, and resilience. Proverbs such as “Nar jolynda zhük qalmaidy” (“no load remains on the path of a camel”), “Zhygylsañ nardan zhygył” (“if you fall, fall from a camel”), and “Zhükti nar köterer, qaiğyny er köterer” (“the camel bears the load, the man bears sorrow”) reflect this symbolism. Such cultural connotations are not found in English or Chinese.

The fish (Chinese 鱼) illustrates another asymmetry. In Chinese, the word 鱼 (yu) is homophonous with 余 (“surplus, abundance”), which has led to its association with wealth, prosperity, and fertility. Fish imagery is widespread in New Year decorations, often combined with lotus flowers, symbolizing abundance and harmony. Eating fish during festivals is believed to ensure prosperity, and idioms such as 鱼水之欢 (“the joy of fish and water”) metaphorically describe marital harmony and intimate affection. In English, however, fish often carries negative connotations, as in a shy fish (a timid person), a cold fish (an emotionally distant person), a loose fish (a morally lax individual), and a poor fish (a foolish person). In Kazakh, fish-related connotations are largely absent.

Finally, the cicada (Chinese 蝉, Kazakh көк шери́тке) is a powerful cultural symbol in Chinese tradition. Due to its long life cycle (up to 17 years) and its ability to shed its skin, the cicada represents renewal, rebirth, and immortality. In ancient China, a cicada was placed in the mouth of the deceased, symbolizing rebirth in the afterlife. Such cultural symbolism is entirely absent in both English and Kazakh.

These examples demonstrate that while the conceptual meaning of animal names may be universal, their associative and cultural meanings are deeply culture-specific. The presence or absence of such connotations plays a crucial role in semantic interpretation, translation, and intercultural communication.

V. CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of the cultural connotations of animal names in English, Kazakh, and Chinese demonstrates that the formation and development of such connotations are grounded in three principal factors. First, they arise from the animals’ observable characteristics, including physical appearance, physiology, behavioral patterns, habits, functions, and other natural features. Second, they are shaped by the national values of particular peoples, encompassing religious beliefs, historical experience, literature and art, geographical environment, customs and traditions, ethical norms, modes of thinking, aesthetic preferences, and overall lifestyle. Third, associative processes play a decisive role, as semantic extension is impossible without association; consequently, comparative studies are essential for identifying and explaining these processes. On this basis, the present study has carried out a systematic comparative analysis of similarities and differences in the connotations of animal names across the three languages.

In general, rational (conceptual) meaning does not possess a national character, whereas associative meaning, which emerges from national culture, displays highly distinct ethnocultural features. Each social group has its own language practices, cognitive patterns, religious beliefs, customs, social systems, and lifestyle, all of which contribute to cultural differentiation. Linguistic differences, therefore, are not limited to variations within semantic systems but also reflect divergences in conceptual and value systems. Language serves not only to represent empirical facts but also to express emotions and culturally specific attitudes. As a result, equivalent lexical items denoting the same concept in different languages may evoke divergent associations due to sociocultural differences. Some semantic meanings are present in one language but absent in another, a phenomenon closely related to the psychological associative habits of social groups, as well as their natural and social environments, traditions, religious beliefs, and everyday practices.

Although the cultural connotations of wild animals, domesticated animals, and insects in the three languages often overlap, they also exhibit notable distinctions. The number of idiomatic expressions associated with animals varies considerably across languages. For example, in Chinese, idioms related to insects constitute the largest group among animal-based idioms and are particularly rich in cultural connotations. Out of approximately 30,000 Chinese idiomatic expressions, about 1 percent—315 items—are associated with insects. In contrast, English and Kazakh contain very few idioms related to insects, and such expressions generally lack strong cultural connotations, with only limited examples involving ants, frogs, or locusts.

The Kazakh language contains an estimated 40,000 proverbs and sayings, of which approximately 30 percent are related to livestock. This proportion is significantly higher than that found in English or Chinese and directly reflects the fact that Kazakh traditional life has been predominantly centered on pastoralism for thousands of years.

Ultimately, meaningful linguistic interaction between civilizations and deep mutual understanding among peoples can only be achieved through respect for and comprehension of each other’s cultural traditions and customs. Only under such conditions can genuine and profound intercultural communication be realized.

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