



ANIMAL METAPHORS AND MORAL CONCEPTUALIZATION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF UZBEK FABLES AND ENGLISH ALLEGORICAL PROSE

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of animal metaphors in shaping moral conceptualization in Uzbek and English literary discourse, focusing on Zarbulmasal by Gulxaniy and Aesop's Fables attributed to Aesop. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the study analyzes how animal imagery is systematically used to represent human traits, social roles, and ethical values. The findings reveal that both traditions rely on the conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS, yet differ in their linguistic realization and discursive function. In the Uzbek text, animal metaphors are embedded within dialogic structures and reinforced through proverbs, forming a multi-layered system of moral reasoning. In contrast, English fables employ concise narrative structures in which moral meaning is conveyed through explicit outcomes. The study demonstrates that while metaphor is cognitively universal, its expression is shaped by cultural and discursive conventions.

Introduction

Metaphor is widely recognized not merely as a stylistic device but as a fundamental mechanism of human cognition through which abstract concepts are structured and understood. Within the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, metaphor operates by mapping concrete, embodied experiences onto more complex domains such as morality, social behavior, and human character. Among these, animal metaphors occupy a particularly significant position, as they provide a culturally accessible and cognitively efficient means of representing human traits, ethical values, and social roles.

In literary discourse, especially in fables and allegorical prose, animals are not depicted as neutral entities but as symbolic carriers of moral meaning. Through systematic metaphorical mappings, animal figures come to represent specific human qualities such as cunning, greed, wisdom, or foolishness thereby enabling authors to construct moral narratives in an indirect yet highly effective manner. This process reflects the broader

conceptual metaphor HUMAN IS AN ANIMAL, through which human behavior is interpreted and evaluated in terms of animal characteristics.

The Uzbek literary tradition provides a particularly rich context for examining such metaphorical constructions. The work *Zarbulmasal* by Gulxaniy represents one of the most prominent examples of allegorical prose in Uzbek literature. As noted in the text, the work brings together proverbs, narrative episodes, and dialogic interactions among animal characters primarily birds to satirically portray various social types, behaviors, and moral shortcomings. Through this structure, animal figures are systematically employed to encode cultural values and critique social norms, making the text an ideal source for analyzing the relationship between metaphor and moral conceptualization.

Similarly, in the English literary tradition, fables such as those attributed to Aesop and allegorical works like *Animal Farm* rely extensively on animal metaphors to represent human behavior and social hierarchies. However, while both traditions utilize animal imagery, the conceptualization of morality through animal metaphors may differ significantly due to cultural, historical, and ideological factors.

Despite the extensive study of metaphor in cognitive linguistics, relatively little attention has been paid to the linguistic realization of animal metaphors in cross-cultural literary discourse, particularly in the context of Uzbek and English texts. Existing research often focuses either on general metaphor theory or on literary interpretation, without systematically examining how metaphorical mappings are encoded in language and how they contribute to moral meaning across different cultural traditions.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze animal metaphors as linguistic and cognitive structures that shape moral conceptualization in Uzbek and English literary discourse. By examining *Zarbulmasal* alongside selected English fables and allegorical prose, the research seeks to identify recurrent metaphorical patterns, explore their linguistic realization, and reveal both universal and culture-specific aspects of metaphor-based moral representation.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative cognitive-linguistic approach to the analysis of animal metaphors in Uzbek and English literary discourse. The methodology is grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory as developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, which views metaphor as a systematic mapping between a source domain and a target domain. In the present research, the source domain consists of animal behavior and characteristics, while the target domain involves human traits, social roles, and moral evaluation.

The corpus for analysis consists of selected texts from Uzbek and English literary traditions that prominently employ animal imagery for moral representation. The Uzbek data is drawn from *Zarbulmasal* by Gulxaniy, a classical work characterized by allegorical narratives and dialogic interactions among animal characters. The English corpus includes selected fables attributed to Aesop and, where relevant, allegorical prose such as *Animal Farm*, which extends animal metaphor into a broader socio-political framework. The selection of texts is based on their representativeness, richness of metaphorical language, and relevance to moral discourse, ensuring comparability across cultural contexts.

To ensure systematic analysis, the study employs a modified version of the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) proposed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007) and further developed into MIPVU by Gerard Steen and colleagues. The procedure involves the following steps:

1. Identifying lexical units related to animals within the text
2. Determining their contextual meaning
3. Comparing this meaning with their more basic, literal meaning
4. Marking the expression as metaphorical if a contrast exists and can be understood via comparison

This approach allows for a systematic distinction between literal and metaphorical uses of animal terms, reducing subjective interpretation.

Following identification, metaphorical expressions are analyzed in terms of their underlying conceptual mappings. The study is structured around the primary metaphor:

PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS

From this, more specific mappings are derived, such as:

FOX → cunning

LION → power or authority

DONKEY → stupidity or ignorance

WOLF → danger or aggression

These mappings are then grouped into broader analytical categories, including:

Animal as human character

Animal as moral type

Animal as social role

Animal as cultural symbol

This categorization enables the identification of recurring metaphorical patterns and their role in constructing moral meaning.

The study adopts a cross-cultural comparative method, examining similarities and differences in metaphorical patterns between Uzbek and English texts. In line with the work of Zoltán Kövecses, the analysis distinguishes between:

universal metaphorical tendencies (based on shared human experience)

culture-specific variations (shaped by social, historical, and cultural factors)

This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how animal metaphors function both as cognitive structures and cultural constructs.

In addition to conceptual mapping, the study examines the linguistic realization of animal metaphors, focusing on:

lexical choices (animal names, descriptive terms)

syntactic structures (predication, comparison, attribution)

narrative framing (dialogue, characterization, moral statements)

This ensures that the analysis remains grounded in actual language use, rather than abstract interpretation alone.

By integrating cognitive metaphor theory with discourse-oriented and cross-cultural analysis, the methodology of this study contributes to bridging the gap between linguistic and literary approaches to metaphor. It demonstrates how animal metaphors function not only as narrative devices but also as systematic linguistic tools for encoding moral cognition.

Analysis

1. PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS: Representation of Human Types

Uzbek examples (*Zarbulmasal*):

Асарнинг қахрамонлари асосан қушлардан иборатдир... қушлар образида турли ижтимоий қатламларнинг... хулқ-атвори... кулги қилинади.”

“Япалоққуш... айтдики...” / “Кўркуш айди...”

English examples (*Aesop's Fables*):

“The tyrant will always find a pretext for his tyranny.” (The Wolf and the Lamb)

These examples demonstrate that in both Uzbek and English traditions, animals function as systematic representations of human beings, confirming the conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS. In *Zarbulmasal*, this metaphor is explicitly articulated at the meta-textual level, where the text itself acknowledges that birds represent different social classes and their behaviors. This makes the metaphor structurally central rather than stylistically optional. Furthermore, the repeated use of verbs of speech such as “айтди” (said) shows that

animals are linguistically constructed as human-like speakers, participating in discourse that mirrors real social interaction. In contrast, Aesop's fables employ the same mapping more implicitly, where the wolf is interpreted as a tyrannical human figure and the lamb as an innocent victim. However, unlike the Uzbek text, the English example moves quickly from metaphor to moral generalization, compressing the mapping into a single narrative conclusion. Thus, while both traditions rely on the same conceptual metaphor, *Zarbulmasal* develops it into a discursive system, whereas Aesop's fables present it as a narrative shortcut for moral evaluation.

2. ANIMAL SPEECH AS MORAL DISCOURSE

Uzbek examples:

“Бор мақтанса топилур, йўқ мақтанса чопилур.”

“Тенг-тенги бирла, тезак қопи бирла.”

English examples:

“If you would only spare my life, I would be sure to repay your kindness.” (The Lion and the Mouse)

The Uzbek examples illustrate that animal speech is not limited to simple dialogue but incorporates proverbial expressions that encode culturally shared moral knowledge. These proverbs are metaphorical in themselves and function as evaluative tools within the narrative, allowing animal characters to articulate complex judgments about behavior, status, and social norms. As a result, metaphor operates on multiple levels: animals represent humans, and within their speech, proverbs introduce additional metaphorical mappings. This creates a layered structure in which moral meaning emerges through discourse rather than through explicit narration. In contrast, the English example shows that while animals also speak and express moral reasoning, their speech is more individual and situational, lacking the dense integration of culturally fixed expressions such as proverbs. The mouse's plea, for instance, conveys values such as mercy and reciprocity, but these are embedded within the immediate narrative context rather than within a broader system of traditional wisdom. Therefore, Uzbek discourse demonstrates a collective and culturally embedded mode of moral conceptualization, whereas English fables rely on a more individualized and context-dependent expression of moral meaning.

3. ANIMAL BEHAVIOR AS MORAL EVALUATION

Uzbek examples:

“Ошукфон қиз эрга борса, ёрчимас...”

English examples:

“The Ass... lived only upon dew, and in a short time died of hunger.” (The Ass and the Grasshopper)

Both Uzbek and English texts construct moral meaning through the consequences of behavior, but they differ in how this process is linguistically and discursively realized. In the Uzbek example, moral evaluation is expressed indirectly through a proverb embedded in dialogue, where the consequences of behavior are implied rather than narratively demonstrated. This reflects a tendency toward implicit moralization, where readers are expected to interpret meaning through culturally familiar expressions. In contrast, the English example presents moral evaluation through explicit narrative outcome, where the ass's behavior directly leads to death, leaving little room for interpretive ambiguity. This difference highlights two distinct modes of metaphorical reasoning: in Uzbek discourse, morality is

mediated through language and tradition, while in English fables, it is constructed through cause-and-effect narrative structures. Despite this difference, both rely on the same underlying mapping in which animal behavior represents human moral qualities.

4. SOCIAL STRUCTURE THROUGH ANIMAL METAPHORS

Uzbek examples:

“Ҳар қанча қалин бўлса топилур... совчи бўлиб боринг.”

English examples:

“The beasts... had a Lion as their king.” (The Kingdom of the Lion)

Animal metaphors in both corpora extend beyond individual traits to represent broader social structures, yet their scope and function differ considerably. In *Zarbulmasal*, animal interactions reflect complex social institutions such as marriage, negotiation, and hierarchy, indicating that the metaphor HUMAN SOCIETY IS AN ANIMAL COMMUNITY operates at a systemic level. The reference to matchmaking and social status suggests that metaphor is used to model real cultural practices, embedding literary representation within lived social reality. By contrast, the English example constructs social hierarchy in a more abstract and generalized manner, where the lion's role as king symbolizes authority rather than a detailed social system. The focus is on illustrating principles of power rather than reproducing the complexity of social relations. Consequently, Uzbek animal metaphors tend to be socially grounded and context-rich, while English fables present simplified and universalized models of hierarchy.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that animal metaphors function as systematic cognitive structures through which human behavior and moral values are conceptualized in literary discourse. In line with Conceptual Metaphor Theory, metaphor operates as a mapping between source and target domains, where concrete experiential knowledge in this case, animal behavior is used to structure abstract domains such as morality and social relations (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The recurrent patterns identified in both Uzbek and English texts support the central conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS, demonstrating its cross-cultural relevance.

However, the analysis also reveals significant differences in the linguistic and discursive realization of this metaphor across the two traditions. In *Zarbulmasal*, metaphor is embedded within extended dialogic structures and reinforced through the integration of proverbs, which function as culturally shared units of meaning. This supports the view that metaphor is not limited to isolated lexical expressions but operates at the level of discourse, shaping patterns of interaction and interpretation (Steen et al., 2010). The presence of proverb-based reasoning within animal speech indicates that moral conceptualization in Uzbek literary discourse is grounded in collective cultural knowledge, where meaning is negotiated through shared linguistic resources.

By contrast, the English data from *Aesop's Fables* demonstrates a more condensed and narratively oriented use of metaphor, where moral meaning is constructed through plot development and explicit outcomes. This aligns with observations in cognitive stylistics that narrative structure plays a central role in guiding interpretation and shaping reader response (Stockwell, 2002). In these texts, metaphor functions as a narrative device, allowing readers to infer moral lessons from the consequences of actions rather than from discursive elaboration.

These differences can be further explained through the framework of cultural variation in metaphor. As argued by Kövecses (2005), while many conceptual metaphors are grounded in shared embodied experience, their realization is influenced by cultural models, social practices, and historical context. The Uzbek text reflects a communicative tradition in which

moral knowledge is transmitted through proverbs and collective discourse, resulting in a multi-layered metaphorical system. In contrast, the English fable tradition prioritizes narrative efficiency and clarity, producing a more linear and explicit form of moral representation.

Another important finding concerns the role of metaphor in representing social structure and hierarchy. In *Zarbulmasal*, animal metaphors are used to model complex social relations, including hierarchy, negotiation, and institutional practices such as marriage. This suggests that metaphor functions as a tool for encoding not only individual traits but also broader social organization. Such findings support previous research in discourse analysis, which emphasizes that metaphor can serve as a means of constructing and reinforcing social reality (Koller, 2004). In the English corpus, however, social relations are typically simplified into generalized moral scenarios, where animals represent abstract types rather than participants in detailed social systems.

From a linguistic perspective, the study highlights the importance of analyzing metaphor at multiple levels, including lexical choice, syntactic structure, and discourse organization. As demonstrated in the Uzbek data, metaphor is realized through complex interactions between dialogue, proverb usage, and narrative framing, confirming that metaphor is a discursive phenomenon rather than merely a lexical one. This observation is consistent with methodological approaches such as MIPVU, which emphasize the need for systematic identification of metaphor across different levels of language use (Steen et al., 2010).

Overall, the findings support the view that conceptual metaphors are both cognitively grounded and culturally mediated. While the mapping between animals and human traits appears to be relatively stable across cultures, the ways in which these mappings are linguistically expressed and integrated into discourse vary significantly. This study therefore contributes to ongoing research by demonstrating that metaphor not only reflects universal patterns of human cognition but also encodes culturally specific models of morality, social structure, and communication.

Conclusion

This study has examined the role of animal metaphors in shaping moral conceptualization in Uzbek and English literary discourse, focusing on *Zarbulmasal* and *Aesop's Fables*. The analysis has demonstrated that both traditions rely on the shared conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS, through which human behavior, social roles, and ethical values are systematically interpreted in terms of animal characteristics. This confirms the broader claim of Conceptual Metaphor Theory that metaphor constitutes a fundamental mechanism of human cognition rather than a purely stylistic feature.

At the same time, the findings reveal significant cross-cultural differences in the linguistic realization and discursive function of these metaphors. In the Uzbek text, animal metaphors are embedded within extended dialogue and reinforced through proverb-based expressions, resulting in a multi-layered system in which moral meaning emerges through interaction and culturally shared knowledge. In contrast, English fables employ a more condensed narrative structure, where metaphorical mappings are realized through plot development and explicit moral outcomes. These differences indicate that while conceptual metaphors may be cognitively universal, their expression is shaped by cultural models, communicative traditions, and genre conventions.

The study also highlights that animal metaphors function not only to represent individual traits but also to encode broader social structures, including hierarchy, authority, and interpersonal relations. In this respect, metaphor serves as a key linguistic tool for constructing and transmitting cultural values within literary discourse.

Overall, the research contributes to the field by demonstrating that conceptual metaphors operate at the intersection of cognition, language, and culture, and that their

analysis requires attention to both universal patterns of thought and culturally specific modes of expression. Future research may expand this approach by incorporating larger corpora, exploring additional genres, or examining the translation of animal metaphors across languages, thereby further illuminating the dynamic relationship between metaphor, discourse, and cultural meaning.

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