



ZOONYMS: CONTEXTUAL MEANING IN LITERARY CONTEXT (BASED ON THE STORY COLLECTION “ANIMAL HEROES” BY ERNEST THOMPSON SETON)

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ABSTRACT

The present research deals with defining contextual meaning of zoonyms and is based on the story collection “Animal Heroes” (1905) by Ernest Thompson Seton, a famous representative of Canadian literature. It also presents a survey of studies done by scholars related to animal names, which have been analyzed from different perspectives. Literary context is a fertile ground for animal names, which contribute a lot to its ethnical, philosophic and symbolic peculiarities. It provides clear evidence that animals serve as the source domain for talking about human beings by ascribing to them positive and negative qualities. Zoonyms are a rich source of metaphors, phraseological units, which represent model national cultural views. They reflect man’s lasting observation of animals’ appearance and behavior, render people’s attitude to them, emphasize some of their qualities, turn into symbols, become the cultural and informational fund of every language and create the mindset of every nation. Animal names are an attractive field of study in many regards as they perform various functions, among which rendering human traits of character is the most outstanding. All the zoonyms in the story collection comprise domestic and wild animals and birds, insects and reptiles, which are typical of the Canadian habitat described in the story collection. They possess both positive and negative contextual meanings and are used to express various feelings (disapproval and despair, contempt and empathy, etc.). The zoonym animal, a general concept embracing all the representatives of fauna, holds a special place in the story collection. On the one hand, it has a pejorative meaning signifying negative traits of character, on the other hand, it supports the juxtaposition “man” / “animal”. It is an open secret that the issue of the contextual meaning of zoonyms is of considerable linguistic interest.

INTRODUCTION

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The term “zoonym” can be defined as a concept embracing all the fauna-related vocabulary. Zoonyms constitute an ancient layer of any language and are a significant component of the vocabulary, and in all languages, their lexical meaning comprises connotative properties, which give rise to metaphoric nomination and testify to the uniqueness of every nation’s mindset.

Zoonyms are a rich source of metaphors, phraseological units, symbols, plots, which represent model national cultural views. They reflect man’s lasting observation of animals’ appearance and behavior, render people’s attitude to our “minor brethren”, emphasize some of their qualities, turn into symbols, become the cultural and informational fund of every language and create the mindset of every nation. Animal names are an attractive field of study in many regards as they perform various functions, among which rendering human traits of character is the most outstanding.

Literary context is a fertile ground for animal names. For example, multiple animalistic images can be found in the works written by the American author of British origin (but known as Canadian author) Ernest Thompson Seton, one of the founders of so-called Modern Canadian literature. His creative activity is in the focus of linguists, philosophers and other scholars interested in the development of cultural historical values of Canadian Americans and in their further influence on the development of the main features of Canadian literature. The publication of Ernest Thompson Seton’s story collection “Animal Heroes” in 1905 [8] became in many ways a unique event in the development of Canadian American literature.

First published in 1905, "Animal Heroes" is a fantastic collection of short animal stories written and illustrated by Ernest Thompson Seton. These wonderful, exciting, and endearing children's stories are perfect bedtime reading for animal-loving kids, and they are not to be missed by adoring fans and collectors of Ernest Thompson Seton's marvelous work.

The stories in the collection are: "The Slum Cat," "Arnaux: The Chronicle of the Homing Pigeon," "Badlands Billy," "The Wolfthat Won," "The Boy and the Lynx," "Little Warhorse," "The History of a Jackrabbit," "Snap: The Story of a Bull-terrier," "The Winnipeg Wolf," "The Legend of the White Reindeer," etc.

Ernest Thompson Seton (1860 - 1946) was an English-born Canadian author and wildlife artist who founded the Woodcraft Indians in 1902. He was also among the founding members of the Boy Scouts of America, established in 1910. He wrote profusely on this subject, the most notable of his scouting literature including "The Birch Bark Roll" and the "Boy Scout Handbook." Many vintage books such as this are becoming increasingly scarce and expensive. We are republishing this book now in an affordable,



modern, high-quality edition complete with a specially-commissioned new biography of the author.

Seton was an accomplished wildlife artist, an author and an expert on animal anatomy and behavior. Born in England in 1860, his family moved to Canada when he was six. Growing up in Toronto, he was fascinated by wildlife, drawing and studying animals, and keeping detailed field observations throughout his life. He studied art in the best academies in Toronto, New York, London and Paris between 1877 and 1896, exhibiting his animal and bird paintings in all these cities.

In the preface to his book, Seton says “there has hitherto been no general work on the Anatomy of Animals from the Art standpoint ... no work presenting the general principles of Comparative Anatomy applied to Art”. In his opinion, the existing specialist works were all open to serious objection as they were written from a surgical or zoological viewpoint rather than meeting the needs of the artist. His primary aim was to show the “visible form of the living animal”, working with a live subject in front of him and another on the dissecting table. The plates showing his drawings are accompanied by detailed notes.

Eight stories detailing the struggle for existence of such animals as a slum cat, a homing pigeon, a wolf, a lynx, and a reindeer.

There is an increasing number of studies done by scholars related to animal names, which have been analyzed from different perspectives [2]. They all support the idea that in finding a new, extraordinary meaning context plays a very important role. “A word when used in a piece of text, usually denotes only one meaning out of multiple meanings it inherently carries. <...> It is the context that determines which meaning of the word should be considered” [2].

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Since ancient times the life of every nation has been closely connected with animals, which were believed to be a kind of totem protecting people and possessing positive and negative qualities. Anna Vinzel stresses the evidence of the interrelation between the animal world and the world of human characters [9]. It has been observed that animal names are quite frequently used to address or refer to human beings in different sociocultural situations in order to dehumanize or elevate an addressee’s status [3].

The zoonym “animal” is a collective name to denote all representatives of fauna and to highlight various aspects of their conduct. In the story collection by Ernest Thompson Seton this zoonym occurs 97 times. As a rule, it has a pejorative shade of meaning because it is common truth that if a man is called an “animal”, it is implied that their behavior is disgusting and unacceptable in the society.



For example, one of the characters of the story collection called just as "The Boy" committed a crime. The others consider that he who bears the name "man" cannot kill another human being. It is done only by an animal, that is not aware of the horror of its action, and it should be exterminated: "He is an animal! He has to be shot!" [8, p. 19]; "Tonight a mad animal crawled behind him and took his life. You call that reason! That animal has to be destroyed!" [8, p. 19]. In the abovementioned examples, the zoonym denotes a cruel, berserk person who is deprived of humaneness and deserves punishment.

In the following example where "The Boy" is compared to a wild animal, emphasis is laid on the behavior of a trapped person who is dangerous and in despair and is ready for an extreme action. Here, the zoonym partially loses its pejorative connotation. So, on the one hand, we can trace the juxtaposition "animal" / "man", on the other hand it draws a line of similarity between two species: man and animal [4] and leaves no doubt about the animal-like nature of people [5]: "The man they hunted had slipped away from human understanding; he had become a wild animal, and they were afraid" [8, p. 19]; "As long as I live I will never forget those wild eyes, like the eyes of a trapped, savage animal" [8, p. 18]; "Let us act like men! That is not an animal down there, that is the man!" [8, p. 20].

In the description of various human behavioral aspects, the zoonym in question is totally deprived of negative connotation. On the contrary, it is used to arouse sympathy and empathy for the characters who feel miserable and unhappy. For example, hunter's look after a long fever resembled that of an animal: "His dark eyes looked at us like a captured animal" [8, p. 97]. In order to show the detrimental effect of war on the human life, the author compares Leon's voice with that of an animal: "Sometimes at night he howled and cried like a wild animal" [8, p. 65]. The following examples demonstrate an overwhelming hunger experienced by the characters: "He ate like starved animal" [8, p. 103]; "Leon and Gene ate everything set before them like starved animals" [14, p. 181]. The author also tries to explain how helpless, ignorant and incapable of seeing the truth people sometimes are: "Men walk the world as animals and we must pray that they see God's light" [8, p. 30]; "Then we would be like the dumb animals of the fields" [8, p. 197]. The peak of despair taking possession of the father who is on the verge of losing his child is reflected in the following example: "'My daughter is dying,' he moaned, and the wind snapped at his pitiful, animal cry" [8, p. 188].

It should be mentioned that in most cases the zoonym animal is found in the pattern of a simile, and it is modified by such attributes as wild, captured, savage, huge, turgid, frightened, starved, etc. in order to specify some idea, add various shades to it and produce a stronger emotional stylistic effect.



The “fauna” of the story collection is rich and varied. The zoonyms, which occur there can be divided into such categories: domestic animals (goat, horse, rabbit, dog, pig, hen, cow, chicken, ram), wild animals (deer, monkey, coyote), birds (pigeon, dove, owl), insects (spider) and reptiles (snake). Acquiring a contextual meaning, they are used to emphasize a certain trait of character or their frame of mind.

The author is particularly fond of the peacock, saying there is “probably nothing else as beautiful in the world of zoology”. He notes the mathematical correctness of the bird’s tail when it’s on display. His illustration shows how the regular arrangement of the feathers creates the perfect geometric design that can be seen in every peacock’s tail when in full plumage. His notes on this plate provide a description of how the surprisingly small number of ordinary feathers (eighteen) support the more exotic 250 posterior feathers, which radiate out to create the display of the male peacock.

The image of horse is usually associated with a hardworking person. However, Z.R. Dubravka states that being polysemantic, this zoonym can express various meanings in different contexts [2]. In order to colorfully describe the crude appearance and unmanageable character of a street urchin, the author names him Horse. In this antonomasia (speaking name) the nominal and contextual meanings occur simultaneously: “They called him Horse because his face looked like the face of the horse, and he was always stomping at the ground” [8, p. 35]. Throughout the whole story collection, the writer highlights the boy’s resemblance to this animal in a number of ways: “I could hear the deep sounds a horse makes inside his chest” [8, p. 37]; “His big horse-eyes looked up at me nervously” [8, p. 154]; “His horse-eyes were wild” [8, p. 193]; “Horse grinned with his ugly horse teeth” [8, p. 199].

The connotation of the zoonym dog also depends on the context. It is interpreted in different modes. Z.R. Dubravka accentuates that it denotes such human qualities as cowardice and slyness [2], whereas S.V. Talko sticks to an opposite opinion. He affirms that the dog is believed to be a symbol of friendship, loyalty, reliability, incorruptibility [7]. In the story collection by Ernest Thompson Seton it is used as an insult comparing a person to the animal in terms of its worst characteristics, such as laziness or groveling [6]: “Bones snapped down at her like a concerned dog” [9]; “Horse whinnied and reared up and Bones was on him like a mad dog” [8, p. 194]; “The others rallied to his cry and they went off howling like a pack of wild dogs” [8, p. 195].

In order to emphasize maternal love and care, “femininity and nurture” [10], the boy’s mother is conceptualized as a mother hen who looks after her “chicks”, clinging to her in both dangerous and peaceful situations:



“My mother cared for them like a mother hen cared for her chicks, even though the hawk of war has flown away” [8, p. 64].

The zoonym cow and bull are used in different contexts. With a touch of disapproval, the former describes the appearance of prostitutes whom the author euphemistically calls “sinful women”: “She bowed and soft flesh of her breasts hung loose and curved like cow udders” [8, p. 70]. The latter renders the intensity of frantic and vehement movement of two brothers: “Whoopeeeeee!” They shouted. They were like wild bulls running down the goat path towards town.” [8, p. 69].

According to S.V. Talko a snake’s meanness is alluded to its ability to get accustomed to any conditions because it can change its skin, therefore a snake can be related to man’s villainy [7]. However, in the book this zoonym produces a strong stylistic effect adding to the mysticism of the episode and making it scary, as it describes the hair that witches used in divination for death: “Green bile poured from his mouth and finally he vomited a huge ball of hair. It fell to the floor, hot and streaming and wiggling like live snakes” [8, p. 103].

In the image of rabbit focus is placed on cowardice, fear and skittishness [3]. This meaning does not change in the linguistic environment: “I was so startled and frightened that I jumped like a wounded rabbit, but he made no move to catch me” [8, p. 187].

The image of wolf usually symbolizes cruelty, anger and mercilessness. It is a typical character of legends and fairy tales where it performs different roles. Sometimes he acts as a powerful friend but sometimes as a pest dangerous for domestic animals [5]. In the analyzed context it is identified with a man who has done a lot of bad things to people and also indicates their disapproval of him: “He is an old wolf who drags around the ground where he has made his kill” [8, p. 189]; “Bah, do not bother your mind about that wolf” [5].

The connotative meaning of the zoonym bear implies rudeness and impudence. Probably it is the bear’s arrogance and condescension that gave rise to the meaning “an impolite impudent person” [5]. In the context, there appears an additional meaning, which stresses the fighting men’s big size and clumsiness: “They tumbled into the snow like two drunken bears” [8, p. 160].

Among the positive qualities, ants represent industry, diligence, cooperation and constant movement. In the example to follow the contextual meaning of the zoonym ant coincides with its logical meaning, the focus being put on their latter peculiarity (constant movement): “The loaded wagons moved between the fields and the village like ants scurrying to store their seeds [8, p. 142]. In another episode the lexeme in question is given a little humorous shade: “Now the people gathered at its doors like



ants, asking questions and passing on rumors about what happened last night” [10].

According to Mark Nickol the zoonym coyote suggests a person who profits from the desperation of others and at worst cheats or misleads people or endangers their lives [4]. The following context gives evidence of the connotation mentioned above: “He landed screaming in the dust and then scrambling to his feet he ran to find refuge behind two of his coyotes” [8, p. 131].

CONCLUSION

The present study aimed at defining the contextual meaning of zoonyms and their functions in literary text shows that animal names can be interpreted in different ways. The story collection “Animal Heroes” by Ernest Thompson Seton contains 128 cases of the use of zoonyms directly and 36 cases of the use of zoonyms as components of similes; they acquire various contextual meanings. All the examples provide clear evidence that animals serve as the source domain for talking about human beings by ascribing to them certain qualities.

Deeply concerned with the future of the prairie, Ernest Thompson Seton fought vigorously to establish reservations for Indians and parks for animals threatened by extinction. In order to provide children with the opportunities for nature study, he founded the Woodcraft Indians in 1902 and later was chairman of the committee that established the Boy Scouts of America.

All the zoonyms in the story collection represent domestic and wild animals and birds, insects and reptiles. They possess both positive and negative contextual meanings and are used to express various feelings and emotions.

There is the zoonym animal describing traits of character, which occurs 15 times and has a pejorative shade of meaning. In several cases it is the basis of juxtaposition *man / animal*. For the sake of specifying some idea and adding an emotional coloring to the situation described, it is modified by various attributes with a strong emotive meaning (wild, captured, savage, huge, turgid, frightened, starved, etc.).

A special role is played by the zoonym owl, which the author turns into a symbol accompanying the narration throughout the whole story collection. It should be mentioned that the use of zoonyms contributes to better understanding of the cultural worldview of the nation and intercultural communication.

Although this paper is based on data from Ernest Thompson Seton’s story collection, the analysis of the contextual meaning of zoonyms is applicable to texts by other authors. Moreover, the discussion of pragmatic functions of zoonyms, which is beyond the scope of the present study, can be of considerable linguistic interest.



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