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A comparative Connotative Analysis of 35 Zoonyms in English and Persian

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Abstract: *Zoonyms as part of linguistic units in each language are used to express different shades of meaning along with their referential meaning as animals. These uses are the results of several mechanisms of semantic change and are structured on the basis of some perceptual and emotive categorizations. The present research is a comparative connotative analysis of 35 English and Persian zoonyms that aims at exploring the dominant types of mechanisms of semantic change as explicated in Geeraerts (2010). Geeraerts distinguishes two major types of non-denotational semantic change including pejoration and amelioration. These mechanisms give rise to semantic changes that reveal emotive judgments. To conduct the analysis, major connotative meanings of the selected zoonyms were elicited and analyzed in terms of being pejorative, meliorative or neutral. The research results show that the most frequent mechanism of semantic change in the studied zoonyms is pejoration that mostly associates zoonyms with negative emotive judgments in both English and Persian.*

Keywords: *Connotation, Semantic Change Mechanisms, Pejoration, Zoonym.*

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a comparative investigation into connotative meanings of 35 English and Persian zoonyms. By exploring emotive overtones of attributive meanings of zoonyms, the research aims at showing the most frequent mechanism of semantic change that reveals emotive judgments of the English and Persian speakers of the selected list of zoonyms. In what follows key words and concepts of the research are expounded.

Meaning and Connotation

Trask (2008: 165, 51) defines meaning and connotation respectively as “the characteristic of a linguistic form which allows it to be used to pick out some aspect of the non-linguistic world” and “the meaning of a word that is broader than its central and primary sense, often acquired through frequent associations”. Thus meaning could be regarded as the mental equivalent of the outer non-linguistic phenomenon whereas connotations and associations deal with the positive or negative feelings people have towards things, properties, actions and so on (Kuiper and Allan, 1996). The connotative meaning is the emotive overtones of semantic content of words and are a rich source of explorations about social attitudes and behaviors in different societies. Connotations are mostly culture-bound and stem from individuals’ feelings, perceptions and mental images that at times give way to the creation of metaphors, that is, mental mappings between a source domain of familiar meanings and a target domain of the new meaning (Geeraerts, 2010). An important feature of connotations is

their being evaluative and judgmental that reveals the positive or negative views about the elements or the features in question although even for synchronic evaluation of connotative meanings one must take into account the perspective and the context of usage (Finkbeiner et al., 2016)

Zoonyms, as parts of linguistic elements, have both denotational and connotational content. Denotations express their referential meanings while connotations stemming from people's feelings, perceptions and mental images reveal the speaker's favorable or unfavorable inclination towards the object of expression. These evaluative expressive connotations relate sets of attributes to the given people, objects or elements. In practice, the study of such attributes would lead us toward an understanding of dominant mindset and favored tendency of zoonym use in a language and society.

Mechanisms of Semantic Change

After a word has been coined and lexicalized it normally undergoes subtle but often wide-ranging changes. Most common are changes in meaning as words are often coined for specific purposes and those purposes end up affecting those items in the lexicon; here semasiological mechanisms involve the creation of new readings within the range of application of an existing lexical item. These semasiological change mechanisms encompass both denotational, referential meaning as well as changes of connotational meaning. (Arnold, 1986). Denotational change of meaning includes generalization and specification by which lexical items may widen in meaning so that their denotation covers more than it did or oppositely they may narrow down where the denotation of their meanings shrinks in range. However, the connotational change of meaning creates pejorative and meliorative meanings that have to do more with emotive overtones of the meaning of the lexical items (Ginzburg et al., 1979) Other main types of mechanisms of semantic change includes metaphor and metonymy, tabooing and euphemization (Geeraerts, 2010). In the following only three of these mechanisms are explicated

- **Pejoration**

Semantic changes not only include the denotation but also involve connotations of a word. These connotations can worsen being termed as Pejoration which is a semantic property of the verbal expressions triggering negative or derogatory meanings (Trask, 2003). Generally, pejoration has to do with the speakers' evaluation of something as being bad. For instance, "notorious" once meant "widely known" and now means "widely and unfavorably known". Presumably pejoration is associated with a cognitive attitude and thus part of a conceptual domain distinct from language.

- **Melioration**

Connotations can get better which is termed melioration. Pejoration is thus opposed to melioration that is the speakers' evaluation of something as being good (Finkbeiner et al., 2016).

- **Metaphor**

As one of the mechanisms of semantic change, metaphor is a breaking-down of the normal literal selectional restriction that the semantic components of a word have in a sentence. (Kuiper and Allan, 1996). In another word it is an extended non-literal meaning which is designed to draw attention to a perceived resemblance. Examples are "foot of mountain", "eye of a needle" or "a window onto the future". With the advent of cognitive linguistics, attentions have been drawn to the pervasive influence of cognitive metaphors, that is, large-scale metaphors that condition a broad range of expressions and which appear to be related to the way we perceive the world. In fact, a cognitive or conceptual metaphor is seen as a mental mapping between two domains; a source domain of familiar meanings and a target domain of the new meanings in focus (Trask, 2008). Saeed (2009) cites two traditional positions about the role of metaphor in language; a classical Aristotelian view that holds a metaphor is a kind of decoration devised on the usual language for gaining certain effects requiring certain interpretations on the part of the readers or listeners. The second view is a Romantic one where metaphor is viewed as an integral part of language and thought as a way of experiencing the world.

Social Attitudes

The connotations of words meaning are based on social attitudes. (Kupier and Allan, 1996). Attitudes can be defined as feelings, thoughts, likes, dislikes, approvals, disapprovals, trusts, distrusts, attractions and repulsions. In fact, attitudes are subjective experiences based on evaluative judgments. However, such subjective experiences have public references. People who hold different attitudes towards an object will differ in what they believe is true or false about that object and finally attitudes are predictably related to social behavior. (Eiser, 1986)

Data and Methodology

The data selected for the present research are from among the thematic group of animals and their nomination in language as zoonyms that form a significant part of the proverbs and idioms in the verbal heritage of many nations including the English and the Persians. Animals have historically been employed in agriculture, transportation, rituals, herding, hunting and entertainment and thus have had a profound influence on the life and psyche of the human beings. This influence has demonstrated itself in the use made of those perceptions to different people, objects and situations. The list of animals here includes vulpines, hoofed, rodents, reptiles, felidae and birds.

The research investigates mechanisms of semantic change in the attributes attached to the zoonyms revealing existing mechanisms of semantic change and the tendency of emotive overtones in the connotative meanings. Here attributes are analyzed in terms of being Pejorative, meliorative or neutral, namely, those cases where the evaluation is neither positive nor negative or it could be interpreted based on the context of the usage.

The selected zoonyms were studied based on the Oxford English dictionary on historical principles (2006) for English and Dehkhoda, Amid, Moein, and Farhang Farsi Persian Dictionaries, all available at online Abadis dictionary (2017) for the Persian part. In the following the table of the analysis of the 35 English and Persian zoonyms is presented.

Table 1. English and Persian zoonym denotative analysis

ZoonymS	English connotations	Sem. mech.	Persian connotations	Sem. mech.
1. wolf	1. Ferocious 2. Destructive 3. Cruel 4. Aggressive 5. Devouring 6. Ravenous 7. malignant, erosive 8. harsh	P P P P P P P P	1. cunning 2. sly 3. acute. 4. Clever 5. Strong 6. experienced	M P M M M M
2. bear	1. rough 2. unmannerly 3. large 4. hirsute 5. firm	p p n n n	1. angry 2. ugly 3. bulky	P P n
3.fox	1. artful m 2. cunning 3. crafty n 4. attractive m	m m m m	1. artful 2. devious	M P
4.vulture	1. consuming 2. vile, rapacious	P p	1. sharp-eyed 2. longeval 3. acute	m m m
5.pig	1. produsive 2. contemptuous	m p	1. nasty, filthy 2. angry, furious	p p

	3. derisive 4. unlikely, untrue 5. unattractive	p n p	3. fat	n
6.hyena	1. cruel p 2. treacherous 3. rapacious, repulsive 4. formidable 5. ravenous	P P P P P p	1. timid 2. opportunistic 3. bad	p p p
7.monkey	1. playful	m	1. horrid 1. ugly	p p
8.worm	1. objectionable 2. contemptuous 3. remorseful 4. perverse 5. greedy	p p P P p	1. useless 2. Destroyer 3. Irritator 4. noxious	p p p p
9.mouse	insignificant	p	1. weak, feeble 2. cunning	p m
10.fly	1. Insignificant 2. active	P m	1. worthless 2. adamant 3. Importunate	p p n
11.bee	1. Busy 2. Sweet 3. small	n m p		
12.ant			1. small, tiny 2. inferior 3. lean 4. bony 5. numerous	n p p p n
13.eagle			1. persistent 2. strong 3. sharp-eyed	m m m
14.raven	glossy dark, gloomy	n	1. mean, stingy	P
15.horse	1. contemptuous playful	p m	1. hard-working 2. acute	m m
16.caw	1. timid 2. coarse, degraded 3. objectionable, distasteful	P P p	1. brainless, bumpkin 2. silly, foolish 3. lazy 4. sluggish 5. draggy	p p p p
17.bull	1. superiority m 2. great m 3. masculinity n	m m n	1. heavy-set 2. dumpy 3. numskull, dunderhead 4. brutish, fractious	n n p p
18.dog	1. reproachful 2. worthless 3. despicable 4. surly 5. coward 6. gay, jovial 7. gallant 8. cunning 9. lucky 10. sad 1. sly 2. poor, mediocre 3. contemptuous	P P P P P m m m m p p p p	1. unworthy 2. bum 3. crummy 4. fractious	p p p p

	4. spurious	p		
19.cock	1. punctual 2. Highest, most prominent	m m	1. beauty 2. masculinity 3. impatience 4. untimely-mannered	m n p p
20.peacock	1. magnificent, ostentatious	m	1. beauty 2. bringing bad-fate	m p
21.hen	1. humorous 2. low 3. fussy 4. very angry 5. scarce	m p p p p	1. timid 2. shivering, frightened	p p
22.chicken	1. youthful m 2. unexperienced timorous, defenseless 3. coward	m p p p	1. weak, lean 2. unexperienced	p p
23.sheep	1. timid 2. defenseless inoffensive 3. stupid 4. poor-spirited	P P P p	1. obedient 2. indecisive 3. foolish	p p p
24.lamb	1. meek 2. gentle 3. innocent 4. weak 5. simple	m m m p p	1. obedient 2. helpless 3. wretch 4. despicable	p p p p
25.goat	1. licentious 2. irresponsible 3. foolish	P P P	1. coward 2. worthless	p p
26.cat	1. charming 2. promiscuous	m p	1. thankless 2. flatterer, fawner	p p
27.sparrow	1. chirpy 2. quick-witted	m m	1. ignorant 2. dullard	p p
28.nightingale	1. melodious	m	1. melodious 2. articulate 3. disturbed, upset	m m p
29.swallow	1. swift	m	wandering	p
30.turtle	1. passionate	m	slow	P
31.lion	1. strong 2. ferocious 3. large 4. courageous 5. cruel	m p n m p	1. massive 2. angry 3. courageous 4. dangerous 5. strong 6. swift 7. victorious	n p m p m m m
32.deer			1. rapidity 2. beauty 3. harmful	m m p
33.lizard	1. lazy 2. slothful	p p	1. slinky 2. secretive 3. treacherous 4. devious	p p p p
34.snake	1. ungrateful 2. treacherous 3. dangerous 4. suspicious 5. contemptuous	P P P P P	1. seductive 2. cruel 3. irritator 4. dubious	m p p p

	6. opprobrious 7. poor 8. humble	P P m		
35.donkey	1. stupid	p	1. stupid 2. heavy 3. massive 4. strong 5. stubborn	p n n m p

Results and Discussion

Out of 217 attributes cited, 139 are pejorative. Next stands melioration with 59 cases. Neutral attributes amount 19, the least among the three types. The same ratio is relevant cross-linguistically. In English out of 112 attributes, 72 are pejorative, 32 is meliorative and 8 are neutral. In Persian, likewise, out of 106 attributes, 68 cases of pejoration, 27 cases of melioration and 11 cases of neutrality are detected. The total and cross-linguistic number of analyzed items are demonstrated in figure 1.

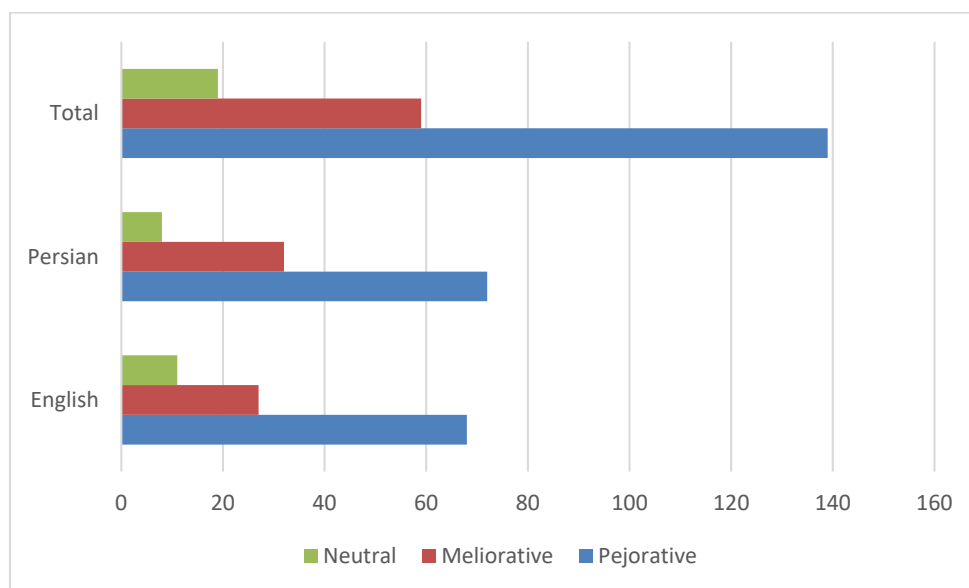


Figure 1: Semantic change mechanism frequencies

The figures clearly show that the most common mechanism of semantic change is Pejoration in total and cross-linguistically. This negative dominance of the use of zoonyms could be related to the inferior position of the animals to human beings and could be indicative of a similar attitude towards animals among the speakers of both English and Persian. Another point worth mentioning is that despite the majority of Pejoration, not all the attributes attached to animals were always the same or similar between the two languages. This is along with the other lateral result of the analysis that shows in some cases what is recorded in the data sources contradicts with what normally one hears on the streets about the animals like the case of the dog as a loyal and kind animal in contrast to recorded attributes of “worthless”, “coward” and “sad” among others, all being instances of pejorative use.

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