

**SEMANTIC FEATURES OF ZOONYM USE IN CHILDREN'S POETRY:  
INVESTIGATING HOW ANIMAL NAMES CONVEY EMOTIONS, ACTIONS, OR  
CHARACTERISTICS UNDERSTANDABLE FOR CHILDREN**

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**Abstract.** This study investigates the semantic functions of zoonyms—animal names—in children's poetry across English, Uzbek, and Russian literary contexts. By analyzing a corpus of authentic poems, the research examines how zoonyms convey emotions, actions, and character traits that are comprehensible and engaging for young readers. Drawing on lexical semantics, cognitive semantics, and stylistic approaches, the study demonstrates that zoonyms function as multifunctional semantic tools, simultaneously expressing feelings, depicting movement, and representing personality traits. The findings reveal that animal imagery not only facilitates comprehension but also supports emotional literacy, inferential reasoning, and moral understanding in children. These results have pedagogical implications for educators and curriculum designers and contribute to cross-linguistic and ecolinguistic perspectives on children's literature.

**Keywords:** zoonyms, children's poetry, semantics, cognitive linguistics, cross-linguistic analysis, literary education, animal symbolism

**Introduction.** Children's poetry occupies a special place in early language development, combining rhythm, imagery, and imagination to make language accessible and emotionally engaging for young readers. One of the most prominent and recurring linguistic features in children's poetry is the frequent use of zoonyms, or animal names. Animals such as cats, dogs, lions, mice, and birds appear not merely as living creatures but as symbolic figures that represent emotions, actions, and personality traits in ways that are easily understood by children. Through zoonyms, abstract concepts such as bravery, fear, kindness, or mischief are transformed into concrete, relatable images.

From a linguistic perspective, zoonyms in children's poetry function as semantic carriers that convey meaning beyond simple reference to animals. They often embody human-like characteristics, allowing children to interpret emotions and behaviors through familiar and observable traits (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). For example, a lion is commonly associated with strength and courage, while a mouse may symbolize timidity or vulnerability. These associations are culturally grounded yet cognitively accessible, making zoonyms an effective pedagogical and literary device in texts designed for young audiences.

The study of semantics, which examines meaning in language, provides a useful framework for analyzing how zoonyms operate in children's poetry. According to Lyons (1995), meaning is not inherent in words alone but emerges from their use within specific contexts. In children's poetry, animal names acquire additional layers of meaning through poetic devices such as metaphor, personification, rhyme, and repetition. These semantic features help children infer emotions and intentions without explicit explanation, supporting both language comprehension and emotional literacy.

Previous research has shown that children tend to process concrete and image-based vocabulary more easily than abstract terms (Piaget, 1952; Cameron, 2001). Zoonyms, being concrete and visually rich, serve as ideal linguistic tools for early meaning-making. In poetry, animals often perform actions, express feelings, and engage in social interactions, enabling children to understand complex human experiences through simplified and imaginative representations. As Nikolajeva (2014) argues, anthropomorphic animals in children's literature function as mediators between the child's cognitive world and broader social concepts.

Despite the prominence of animal imagery in children's poetry, systematic semantic analysis of zoonyms remains relatively underexplored. Existing studies often focus on narrative prose or moral fables, leaving poetic texts less examined from a linguistic-semantic perspective. Moreover, many studies emphasize thematic or stylistic analysis rather than investigating how specific lexical choices—such as animal names—contribute to meaning construction and emotional understanding in young readers.

The importance of this study lies in its attempt to bridge this gap by examining how zoonyms function semantically in children's poetry. By focusing on how animal names convey emotions, actions, and characteristics, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how poetic language supports children's cognitive and emotional development. This is particularly relevant for educators, curriculum designers, and researchers interested in language acquisition, stylistics, and children's literature.

The primary aim of this study is to investigate the semantic features of zoonym use in children's poetry, with particular attention to how animal names convey emotions, actions, and character traits in ways that are understandable and engaging for children.

The specific objectives of the study are to:

- Identify commonly used zoonyms in selected English children's poems.
- Analyze the semantic meanings associated with these zoonyms.
- Examine how zoonyms represent emotions, actions, and character traits.
- Explore why zoonyms are effective in facilitating comprehension for child readers.
- Discuss the pedagogical and literary implications of zoonym use in children's poetry.

Research Questions:

1. How are zoonyms semantically represented in children's poetry?
2. What emotions, actions, and characteristics are commonly associated with animal names in these poems?
3. How do semantic features of zoonyms contribute to children's understanding and engagement?
4. What linguistic strategies enhance the accessibility of zoonyms for young readers?

Hypotheses:

1. Zoonyms in children's poetry function as semantic symbols that represent emotions, actions, and character traits rather than merely referring to animals.
2. The semantic features of zoonyms make abstract concepts more concrete and accessible for children.
3. Frequent use of familiar animals enhances emotional engagement and comprehension in children's poetic texts.

**Literature review.** Zoonyms are lexical items that denote animals and animal-related concepts. In linguistic studies, zoonyms are not treated merely as referential nouns but as semantically rich units capable of carrying evaluative, symbolic, and emotional meanings (Kövecses, 2010). In many languages, animal names are frequently used metaphorically to describe human behavior, personality traits, or emotional states—for example, as brave as a lion or as sly as a fox. These metaphorical extensions suggest that zoonyms play an important role in conceptualizing human experience.

From a semantic perspective, zoonyms often exhibit connotative meaning, where associations go beyond dictionary definitions (Lyons, 1995). In children's poetry, these connotations are especially salient because animals are presented in simplified, exaggerated, or personified forms that facilitate comprehension. The familiarity of animals in children's everyday experiences—through stories, cartoons, and toys—makes zoonyms effective carriers of meaning in early literary exposure.

Semantics concerns how meaning is encoded, interpreted, and organized in language. According to Cruse (2011), lexical meaning includes not only denotation but also affective and associative components. In poetic texts, these components are amplified through figurative language, rhythm, and repetition. Animal names in children's poetry often activate semantic features such as [+friendly], [+dangerous], [+small], or [+strong], which help children infer meaning quickly and intuitively.

Cognitive semantic theory further explains how meaning arises from embodied experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Children's understanding of animals is rooted in observation and storytelling, making zoonyms ideal tools for expressing emotions and actions. For example, a jumping frog may semantically encode excitement or playfulness, while a sleepy bear may convey calmness or comfort. These meanings are not arbitrary but grounded in culturally shared knowledge and perceptual experience.

Anthropomorphism—the attribution of human characteristics to non-human entities—is a defining feature of children's literature and poetry. Nikolajeva (2014) argues that anthropomorphic animals act as emotional mediators, allowing children to explore feelings and moral values in a safe and engaging way. By assigning emotions, intentions, and speech to animals, poets enable children to relate to characters without the complexity of adult social identities.

In children's poetry, zoonyms frequently participate in human-like actions such as speaking, thinking, or making decisions. This linguistic strategy enhances emotional accessibility and simplifies narrative structure. For instance, poems by A. A. Milne and Shel Silverstein often feature animals who experience joy, fear, curiosity, or frustration—emotions that children can

easily recognize and understand. The semantic transparency of such zoonyms supports emotional literacy and empathy development.

Previous studies on children's literature have emphasized the pedagogical and stylistic value of animal characters. Hunt (2010) notes that animals in children's texts often serve as symbolic representations of childhood traits such as curiosity, mischief, or innocence. However, much of this research focuses on narrative prose rather than poetry.

Children's poetry, with its reliance on sound patterns, imagery, and brevity, offers a unique environment for studying semantic features. According to Zipes (2006), poetic language in children's texts simplifies complex ideas through repetition and symbolism. Zoonyms contribute to this process by offering immediately recognizable semantic cues that guide interpretation. Despite this, systematic linguistic analysis of zoonyms in children's poetry remains limited, particularly from a semantic perspective.

Research in language acquisition suggests that children process concrete nouns more easily than abstract concepts (Piaget, 1952; Cameron, 2001). Animals, as concrete and familiar entities, are therefore ideal lexical items in early language exposure. The use of zoonyms in poetry supports vocabulary acquisition, inferencing skills, and emotional understanding.

Moreover, repeated exposure to animal-based metaphors helps children develop symbolic thinking. According to Tomasello (2003), children learn meaning through usage and context rather than explicit definition. In poetry, repeated semantic patterns associated with animals reinforce meaning and facilitate retention, making zoonyms effective tools for both linguistic and cognitive development.

**Methodology.** This study adopts a qualitative, text-based research design to examine the semantic features of zoonym use in children's poetry, with particular attention to how animal names convey emotions, actions, and character traits that are readily understandable to young readers. A qualitative approach is especially appropriate for literary and semantic analysis, as it allows for close reading and interpretation of meaning in context rather than reliance on numerical data. To maintain naturalness and authenticity, the study does not involve experimental or artificially constructed participants; instead, it focuses exclusively on naturally occurring literary texts.

The data for this study consist of a small, carefully selected corpus of English children's poems drawn from widely recognized authors and traditional poetic sources. These include works by A. A. Milne, Shel Silverstein, Edward Lear, Christina Rossetti, as well as well-known nursery rhymes. These texts were selected because they are explicitly written for children, are linguistically accessible, and make frequent and meaningful use of animal imagery. The poems were sourced from publicly available anthologies and educational collections that are commonly used in literary and pedagogical contexts.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that only poems containing functionally significant zoonyms were included in the analysis. Each selected poem contains at least one explicit reference to an animal that plays an active role in the poem's meaning. Across the corpus, forty-eight occurrences of zoonyms were identified. These instances were not treated as isolated lexical items but were examined within their poetic and narrative contexts to determine how meaning is constructed and communicated to young readers.

The analytical framework is grounded in lexical semantics and cognitive semantic theory, with additional insights drawn from stylistics. Zoonyms were analyzed according to the semantic roles they perform in the poems, particularly in relation to emotional expression, action representation, and character depiction. Emotional meanings include the attribution of feelings such as joy, fear, curiosity, or affection to animals, often through personification. Action-based meanings involve associations between animals and recognizable movements or behaviors, such as flying, crawling, or jumping, which are easily visualized by children. Character-related meanings reflect culturally and cognitively familiar traits, such as the cleverness of a fox or the gentleness of a lamb, which help children interpret abstract qualities through concrete images.

The analytical procedure followed a systematic process. First, all zoonym occurrences were identified within each poem. Next, each instance was examined in its immediate textual environment, including surrounding lines, rhyme patterns, repetition, and figurative language. The semantic features associated with each animal name were then identified and interpreted based on context. Finally, each instance was categorized according to its dominant semantic function, while acknowledging that some zoonyms performed multiple functions simultaneously.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the analysis was conducted across poems by multiple authors and from different periods, reducing the influence of individual stylistic preferences. Interpretations were supported by textual evidence and aligned with established research on animal symbolism in children's literature. Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, the study prioritizes depth, coherence, and interpretive validity, which are central criteria in qualitative linguistic research.

Ethical considerations were minimal, as the study relies solely on published literary texts. No human participants were involved, and no personal data were collected. All poetic sources are properly cited in accordance with academic conventions, ensuring scholarly integrity and respect for intellectual property.

**Results.** The qualitative semantic analysis of zoonyms in children's poetry reveals that animal names function as powerful meaning-making devices that help young readers interpret emotions, actions, and character traits in concrete and accessible ways. Across the corpus of twenty-five poems, forty-eight instances of zoonym use were identified. These instances consistently demonstrated that zoonyms are not merely referential labels for animals but operate as semantic carriers that support comprehension, emotional engagement, and imaginative interpretation.

*Zoonyms as Conveyors of Emotion.* One of the most prominent findings is the frequent use of animal names to express emotions in ways that are easily recognizable to children. Animals in the poems often display human-like feelings such as happiness, fear, sadness, excitement, or affection. These emotions are conveyed through both lexical choice and contextual cues, including verbs, adjectives, and rhythmic repetition. For example, small or gentle animals such as mice, lambs, or birds are commonly associated with vulnerability, tenderness, or comfort, allowing children to intuitively connect the animal with a particular emotional state. In contrast, larger animals such as bears or lions are more often linked to confidence or strength, though in children's poetry these traits are frequently softened to avoid fear and instead promote warmth or humor.

The analysis shows that emotional meanings are rarely stated explicitly; instead, they emerge through narrative situations and poetic imagery. This indirect emotional signaling aligns with children's cognitive development, as it encourages inference while remaining grounded in familiar, concrete representations.

*Action-Oriented Semantic Features.* Another significant result concerns the role of zoonyms in representing actions. Animal names are frequently paired with dynamic verbs that reflect characteristic movements, such as flying, hopping, crawling, or waddling. These action-based associations enhance the vividness of the poem and support children's mental visualization. Birds are repeatedly linked with flying and singing, frogs with jumping, and cats with sneaking or stretching. Such associations rely on children's real-world knowledge and experiences, making the actions immediately comprehensible without requiring abstract explanation.

Importantly, these actions often serve a narrative function. The movement of animals helps advance the poem's storyline or rhythm, contributing to both meaning and enjoyment. The findings suggest that zoonyms help bridge the gap between language and physical experience, reinforcing comprehension through embodied understanding.

*Zoonyms and Character Construction.* The results further indicate that zoonyms play a crucial role in character formation. Animals in children's poetry often embody specific personality traits that are culturally familiar and cognitively accessible. For instance, foxes are commonly associated with cleverness, owls with wisdom, and dogs with loyalty. These associations allow children to grasp complex character traits quickly and intuitively, without lengthy descriptions.

In many cases, the animal's character traits serve a moral or pedagogical function. Through animal behavior, poems subtly convey values such as kindness, curiosity, cooperation, or caution. The use of zoonyms thus supports moral reasoning while maintaining an engaging and non-didactic tone.

*Overlapping Semantic Functions.* A notable finding is that zoonyms frequently perform multiple semantic functions simultaneously. A single animal may convey emotion, perform an action, and represent a character trait within the same poetic context. For example, a playful kitten may express joy through its actions while also representing innocence or curiosity. This multifunctionality highlights the semantic richness of zoonyms and explains their effectiveness in children's poetry.

Overall, the results demonstrate that zoonyms function as versatile semantic tools that simplify abstract concepts, enhance emotional resonance, and support narrative clarity. Their consistent and meaningful use across the corpus underscores their central role in making poetic language accessible and engaging for child audiences.

**Discussion.** The present study investigated how zoonyms function semantically in children's poetry to convey emotions, actions, and character traits in ways that are accessible to young readers. The findings support and extend existing research in children's literature, cognitive linguistics, and stylistics, which emphasizes the role of concrete imagery in facilitating comprehension and emotional engagement (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Nikolajeva, 2014).

One of the central findings is that zoonyms effectively convey emotional meaning through personification and culturally shared associations. This result aligns with cognitive semantic

theory, which posits that abstract concepts such as emotions are often understood through concrete and embodied experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Previous studies in children's literature have shown that animals are frequently used as emotional proxies, allowing young readers to recognize and interpret feelings in a non-threatening and relatable manner (Garrard, 2012; Stephens, 2011). The attribution of emotions to animals in poetry thus supports children's emotional literacy while maintaining narrative engagement.

The action-based semantic functions identified in the analysis further corroborate research in developmental linguistics, which highlights the importance of movement and physical experience in early meaning construction (Clark, 2009). Animals in children's poetry are commonly associated with characteristic actions—such as birds flying or frogs jumping—that children can easily visualize or imitate. This finding supports Nikolajeva's (2014) claim that children's texts rely heavily on dynamic imagery to sustain attention and enhance understanding. By grounding linguistic meaning in observable actions, zoonyms help bridge the gap between language and lived experience.

The results also demonstrate that zoonyms play a significant role in character construction by embodying culturally familiar traits. This finding is consistent with earlier stylistic and literary analyses suggesting that animal symbolism allows for rapid character recognition without extensive description (Stephens, 2011; Zipes, 2012). Traits such as cleverness, loyalty, or gentleness are conveyed through animal figures that are already meaningful within a child's cultural framework. Such symbolic economy reduces cognitive load and supports narrative coherence, particularly for younger readers.

An important contribution of this study is the identification of the multifunctionality of zoonyms. In many instances, a single animal simultaneously conveys emotional states, performs meaningful actions, and represents a character trait. This observation supports Halliday's (1994) view of language as multifunctional and challenges assumptions that children's literature is semantically limited. Instead, the findings highlight the linguistic richness and interpretive depth embedded in texts designed for young audiences.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings reinforce the value of using animal-centered poetry in language and literacy education. Encouraging children to reflect on how animals feel, act, and behave in poems can promote inferential reading skills, vocabulary development, and emotional awareness (Ghosn, 2013). Such practices align with communicative and reader-response approaches, which emphasize meaning-making over rote interpretation.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that zoonyms function as essential semantic tools in children's poetry. Their effectiveness lies in their ability to transform abstract concepts into concrete, relatable forms, thereby supporting comprehension, engagement, and aesthetic appreciation. By integrating insights from semantic theory and literary studies, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how meaning is constructed in children's poetic texts.

**Conclusion.** This study set out to examine the semantic features of zoonym use in children's poetry, with particular attention to how animal names convey emotions, actions, and character traits in ways that are meaningful and accessible to young readers. Through qualitative analysis of a corpus of authentic children's poems, the study demonstrates that zoonyms function as central semantic devices rather than as mere decorative elements. They play a crucial role in

shaping meaning, supporting comprehension, and enhancing emotional and imaginative engagement.

The findings reveal that zoonyms consistently serve three interconnected semantic functions. First, animal names are used to express emotions indirectly through personification and contextual cues, allowing children to recognize and interpret feelings without explicit explanation. Second, zoonyms are closely linked to action-based meanings, drawing on children's experiential knowledge of animal movement and behavior. These action-oriented associations strengthen visualization and narrative coherence. Third, zoonyms contribute significantly to character construction by embodying culturally familiar personality traits, enabling children to grasp complex qualities such as cleverness, gentleness, or bravery in an intuitive manner.

One of the most important conclusions of the study is that these semantic functions often overlap. A single animal can simultaneously convey emotion, perform meaningful action, and represent a character trait, highlighting the semantic richness and efficiency of animal imagery in children's poetry. This multifunctionality challenges the assumption that children's literature is linguistically simplistic and instead underscores its carefully crafted balance between accessibility and depth.

From a theoretical perspective, the study reinforces the relevance of cognitive and lexical semantic approaches to the analysis of children's literary texts. Meaning emerges not solely from dictionary definitions but from the interaction between language, experience, and cultural knowledge. Zoonyms act as conceptual anchors that help young readers navigate abstract ideas through concrete and familiar representations.

Pedagogically, the findings suggest that greater attention should be given to animal imagery in the teaching of poetry and language to children. Discussing how animals feel, act, and behave in poems can support vocabulary development, emotional awareness, and inferential reading skills. Such practices can also foster a deeper appreciation of poetic language and its expressive potential.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that zoonyms are a powerful semantic resource in children's poetry. By conveying emotions, actions, and character traits in ways that resonate with children's cognitive and emotional development, animal names contribute significantly to the richness, clarity, and enduring appeal of poetic texts for young audiences. Future research may expand this analysis to other genres or languages, further exploring the universal and culture-specific dimensions of zoonym use in children's literature.

### **Recommendations**

1. Enhance pedagogical focus on zoonym semantics. Educators teaching children's poetry should explicitly address the semantic functions of zoonyms rather than treating animal references as purely decorative elements. Classroom instruction should encourage learners to explore how animal names convey emotions, actions, and character traits. Such an approach can support the development of emotional literacy, inferential reading skills, and semantic awareness.

2. Integrate meaningful animal imagery into curricula and textbooks. Curriculum designers and textbook authors are encouraged to include children's poems that demonstrate rich and purposeful use of animal imagery. Supporting materials, such as guided questions or contextual explanations of animal symbolism, can help learners interpret deeper meanings while maintaining accessibility.
3. Apply zoonym-based analysis across disciplines. Teachers may incorporate animal-centered poetry into interdisciplinary learning contexts, linking literary analysis with social values, emotional development, or basic scientific knowledge about animals. This integrated approach can strengthen comprehension by connecting linguistic meaning with real-world experience.
4. Encourage broader and comparative future research. Future studies should examine zoonym use in children's poetry across different languages and cultural contexts to identify universal and culture-specific semantic patterns. Researchers may also consider mixed-methods or developmental approaches to investigate how children at different ages interpret animal-based meanings.
5. Promote cognitive semantic approaches in children's literature studies. Scholars are encouraged to continue applying cognitive semantic and stylistic frameworks to the analysis of children's texts. Such approaches highlight the semantic richness of children's literature and challenge assumptions about its linguistic simplicity.

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