

HUMOR AND PLAYFULNESS THROUGH ZOONYMS IN CHILDREN'S POEMS

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Abstract. Humor and playfulness constitute core aesthetic and pedagogical elements of children's poetry. Among the linguistic devices that generate these effects, zoonyms—lexical units denoting animals—occupy a particularly prominent position. This thesis examines the role of zoonyms in the construction of humor and playfulness in children's poems, focusing on their stylistic, semantic, and cognitive functions. Drawing on stylistics, cognitive poetics, and children's literature theory, the study analyzes selected poems by canonical authors such as Edward Lear, A. A. Milne, and Dr. Seuss. The analysis demonstrates that zoonym-based humor emerges primarily through anthropomorphism, exaggeration, and phonological play, enabling poets to negotiate the boundaries between fantasy and reality. The thesis argues that zoonyms function not merely as decorative elements but as complex semiotic tools that facilitate linguistic development, emotional engagement, and moral reasoning in child readers.

Keywords: children's poetry; zoonyms; humor; playfulness; anthropomorphism; nonsense verse; stylistic devices; cognitive poetics; language development

Introduction. Children's poetry represents a distinctive literary mode characterized by linguistic simplicity, rhythmic structure, and imaginative play. However, despite its apparent simplicity, children's poetry often exhibits sophisticated stylistic strategies designed to address the cognitive and emotional needs of young readers. Humor, in particular, serves as a crucial mechanism through which poetic texts engage children, sustain attention, and foster a positive relationship with language (Nikolajeva, 2014).

One of the most productive sources of humor in children's poetry is the use of zoonyms. Animals are cognitively salient for children, as they occupy a central place in early learning, storytelling, and play. When animals are transformed into poetic characters endowed with human traits, they create a playful narrative distance that allows children to explore social norms, emotions, and behavior in a non-threatening manner.

This thesis aims to investigate how zoonyms function as generators of humor and playfulness in children's poems and to examine their broader implications for linguistic creativity and child development.

From a stylistic perspective, zoonyms operate as highly flexible lexical units capable of carrying literal, metaphorical, and symbolic meanings. While linguistically they denote specific animal species, in poetic discourse they often function as conceptual metaphors representing human qualities (Crystal, 2008).

Leech's (1969) notion of foregrounding is particularly relevant here: zoonyms foreground deviation from normative human-centered narration by introducing non-human agents into social and linguistic roles typically reserved for people. This deviation produces humor while simultaneously inviting interpretive engagement.

From a cognitive viewpoint, animals serve as ideal mediators between the familiar and the fantastical. As Hunt (2010) argues, animal characters in children's literature provide a "buffer zone" that allows children to process complex ideas indirectly.

Main body. Anthropomorphism constitutes the primary mechanism through which zoonyms generate humor in children's poems. The attribution of speech, emotions, and social roles to animals creates what incongruity theory identifies as a mismatch between expectation and representation (McGhee, 2002).

This technique is clearly observable in *Now We Are Six* by A. A. Milne. In poems such as "Disobedience", animal figures mirror childlike behavior, creating humor through gentle irony. The animals' human traits invite identification while maintaining a playful distance that prevents moralization from becoming didactic.

Similarly, Edward Lear's nonsense verse in *A Book of Nonsense* employs anthropomorphic animals whose actions lack logical motivation. The humor arises not from narrative resolution but from sustained absurdity, reinforcing playfulness as an end in itself.

Exaggeration intensifies zoonym-based humor by pushing animal behavior beyond plausible limits. In children's poetry, exaggeration often aligns with the literary tradition of nonsense, where meaning is deliberately destabilized.

Dr. Seuss's *If I Ran the Zoo* exemplifies this strategy through the invention of fantastical animals with exaggerated physical and behavioral traits. The poem's humor lies in its deliberate excess: animals become linguistic constructions rather than representations of real creatures.

This exaggeration encourages what cognitive poetics describes as conceptual blending, in which children combine real-world knowledge of animals with imaginative extensions (McGhee, 2002). Such blending stimulates creative thinking and linguistic experimentation.

Zoonyms also contribute to humor through their phonetic and rhythmic properties. Animal names often contain sound patterns that lend themselves to rhyme, alliteration, and onomatopoeia, enhancing the musical dimension of poetry.

In Edward Lear's *The Owl and the Pussy-Cat*, the humor emerges not only from the unlikely pairing of animals but also from the poem's rhythmic repetition and melodic structure. The sound patterns reinforce memorability and pleasure, aligning with Crystal's (2008) view that phonological play is central to early linguistic creativity.

Such sound-based humor supports phonological awareness and strengthens children's sensitivity to prosody and rhythm.

At an educational level, zoonym-based humor facilitates indirect moral instruction. Animal characters externalize human flaws, allowing children to evaluate behavior without self-implication. This aligns with contemporary pedagogical approaches that prioritize experiential learning over direct moralization (Ginsburg, 2007).

Moreover, repeated exposure to playful zoonymic structures enhances vocabulary acquisition, syntactic awareness, and narrative competence. Humor thus functions as a cognitive scaffold rather than mere entertainment.

This MA-level analysis demonstrates that zoonyms function as complex stylistic, cognitive, and pedagogical tools in children's poetry. Through anthropomorphism, exaggeration, and phonological play, zoonyms generate humor that is both aesthetically engaging and developmentally productive.

Conclusion. By examining poems by Edward Lear, A. A. Milne, and Dr. Seuss, the study confirms that zoonym-based humor operates at multiple levels of meaning, facilitating imagination, language development, and moral reflection. Ultimately, zoonyms serve as a crucial mechanism

through which children's poetry negotiates the relationship between play and pedagogy, ensuring its enduring relevance and appeal.

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