

*Article***Title: ACQUISITION OF ANIMAL-RELATED IDIOMS BY MIDDLE SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN**Firstname Lastname¹ **Adizova Dildora****1. Affiliation*** Correspondence: dildoraadizova2497@gmail.com**1. Materials and Methods**

Although phraseological units have been extensively studied from a theoretical perspective in linguistics, their psycholinguistic aspects—namely, how they are acquired in the human mind, how they are perceived, and the mechanisms of their use—have not been sufficiently explored. In this regard, the psycholinguistic study of idioms involving animal names is considered a pressing issue in Uzbek linguistics. The research methodology is based on the general theoretical principles of linguistics and psycholinguistics. The following methods are employed in the study: Descriptive analysis;

Corpus and text analysis; Experimental methods (idiom–meaning matching, identifying idioms based on pictures, word completion tasks);

Psychometric techniques (reaction time, percentage of correct responses).

2. Results

Research findings: Can be applied in the process of teaching phraseological units, particularly in schools and higher education; Help language learners effectively acquire phraseological expressions; Serve as a theoretical foundation for further studies in psycholinguistics, phraseology, and cognitive linguistics.

3. Discussion

For the first time, Uzbek animal-related idioms are systematically analyzed from a psycholinguistic perspective. Their acquisition process is examined on an experimental basis. The mechanisms of perceiving idioms based on animal imagery are linked to age factors and cultural context.

4. Conclusion

Animal-related idioms play an important role in shaping the metaphorical thinking of children in the Uzbek language. Age is a significant factor in acquisition: younger learners tend to interpret idioms based on the actual characteristics of animals, while older learners begin to grasp their symbolic meanings as well. In the educational process, the use of visualization, text-based, and contextual exercises in explaining idioms increases effectiveness.

Introduction

Language is not only a means of communication but also a repository of a nation's historical memory, cultural values, and worldview. It reflects the collective experience of a people and serves as a key to understanding their cognitive and cultural identity (Aitchison, 2010). Within the rich layers of language, phraseological units constitute a particularly significant domain, as they embody symbolic representations of thought, emotion, and social practice.

Phraseological expressions, especially idioms based on animal names, are widely used in the Uzbek language. They provide valuable insights into national cognition, traditions, and everyday life, while also reflecting the cultural perception of nature and human character. In these expressions, animal imagery often serves as a metaphorical tool to describe human behaviors, virtues, and shortcomings (Glucksberg, 2001). For example, animal-based idioms not only convey figurative meanings but also encapsulate socio-cultural values deeply rooted in the collective consciousness.

From a psycholinguistic perspective, the comprehension and acquisition of phraseological units represent complex cognitive processes. Idioms involving animal imagery are the product of metaphorical and associative thinking, and their interpretation depends heavily on factors such as age, cognitive development, and cultural context (Karlsson, 2019). Younger language users may interpret such idioms literally, while older or more experienced individuals are more likely to grasp their figurative meanings. This developmental trajectory highlights the importance of investigating idiomatic understanding in psycholinguistic research.

Consequently, the study of phraseological units—particularly those based on animal imagery—has significance not only for linguistic analysis but also for pedagogy, intercultural communication, and cultural studies. Exploring how these idioms are processed, acquired, and understood contributes to a broader understanding of how language reflects human cognition and culture.

Animal-Based Idioms and Their Psycholinguistic Foundations

Animal-related idioms are widespread across languages, reflecting the culture, worldview, and values of a given people. For instance, in Uzbek we find idioms such as *ilonning yog'ini yalagan* (“as sly as a snake”), *kapalagi uchmoq* (“to be startled, frightened”), or *otdan tushsa ham, egardan tushmaslik* (“to remain stubborn despite circumstances”). These idioms vividly illustrate how symbolic associations with animals are used to conceptualize human traits and behaviors.

In psycholinguistic research, the primary focus is not only on the meaning of such idioms, but also on how they are understood, processed, and acquired in the human mind. Several psycholinguistic foundations are particularly relevant to this study:

Cognitive mechanisms. In idiom comprehension, people often rely on metaphorical and associative thinking. For example, the word *fox* (similar to *tulki* in Uzbek) frequently activates the concept of cunning or trickery.

Mental lexicon. Idioms are generally stored as ready-made chunks in the mental lexicon, which enables speakers to retrieve and use them rapidly in discourse without re-analyzing their compositional meaning each time.

Language acquisition process. Children typically begin by interpreting idioms literally and gradually acquire their figurative meanings through contextual exposure. For instance, a child may initially interpret the idiom *qo'ydek yuvosh* (“gentle as a sheep”) in reference to an actual sheep, but later learn to apply it metaphorically to describe a kind or mild-mannered person.

These foundations highlight that idioms are not only linguistic phenomena but also cognitive and cultural constructs, whose comprehension depends on the interplay of metaphorical thinking, lexical storage, and developmental experience.

Stages in the Acquisition of Animal-Based Idioms

Literal interpretation. At an early age, children tend to perceive idioms in their direct, literal meaning.

Contextual understanding. Through exposure to discourse, the idiom is gradually understood in its figurative sense based on situational context.

Metaphorical awareness. The learner begins to recognize the underlying metaphorical mapping that motivates the idiom (e.g., the cunning nature of a fox).

Automation. The idiom becomes stored in the mental lexicon as a ready-made unit and is accessed and produced rapidly in communication.

Phraseological Units in Linguistics and Their Role

Phraseological units are among the unique riches of a language. Unlike free word combinations, they possess stability, figurative meaning, and imagery, while simultaneously reflecting national and cultural values. For this reason, the study of phraseological units developed into an independent field of linguistics during the 20th century (Kunin, 1996; Vinogradov, 1977).

Definitions of phraseological units vary. For instance, A.V. Kunin (1996) describes them as “ready-made language units composed of stable components, often with figurative meaning.” Sh. Rahmatullaev (1992), on the other hand, interprets them as linguistic units that embody the worldview and historical experience of a people.

There are several criteria for classifying phraseological units:

Semantic criterion: free combinations, phraseological combinations, and idioms (Vinogradov, 1977).

Structural criterion: phraseological units in the form of word combinations or sentences.

Functional criterion: classifications based on content, such as zoonymic (animal-based), somatic (body-part-based), religious, mythological, etc. (Rahmatullaev, 1992).

In Uzbek, phraseological units also reflect the people’s worldview, lifestyle, and mentality. For example, the idiom *otning kallasiday* (“as big as a horse’s head”) demonstrates the cultural perception of the horse as a symbol of strength and grandeur. Similarly, animal-related idioms are widely used in proverbs and sayings, such as *Bo’ridan qo’rqqan qo’y boqmaydi* (“He who fears the wolf should not herd sheep”) or *Pashshadan fil yasamoq* (“to make an elephant out of a fly”).

Psycholinguistics and the Acquisition of Phraseological Units

Psycholinguistics, as the discipline that studies the complex relationship between language and thought, also examines the processes involved in comprehending and acquiring phraseological units (Aitchison, 2010). Central questions include how the human brain perceives these linguistic units, how they are stored in memory, and how they are retrieved and used in speech.

Research indicates that the active acquisition of phraseological units in the mother tongue typically begins around the ages of 7–8 (Nippold, 1991). Second-language learners, however, often cling to the literal meaning and face difficulties in grasping the figurative sense (Karlsson, 2019). This highlights the importance of both cognitive development and cultural familiarity in the successful mastery of idiomatic expressions.

Cognitive Foundations of Animal-Based Idioms

Phraseological units associated with animal imagery are formed in the collective consciousness of a people on the basis of metaphorical thinking. Through observation, humans generalize animal behaviors and traits and compare them with human qualities, both positive and negative.

For example:

Fox → cunning, slyness

Wolf → greed, cruelty

Sheep → meekness, obedience

Horse → strength, devotion

Dog → loyalty, but sometimes baseness

Such metaphorically grounded idioms are widespread across languages. For instance, English has “*as sly as a fox*,” while Russian uses “*волк в овечьей шкуре*” (“a wolf in sheep’s clothing”). This demonstrates that animal imagery possesses a transnational cognitive basis (Kövecses, 2010).

From a psycholinguistic perspective, idioms with animal imagery are shaped in the mind through mechanisms of **associative thinking** and **conceptual metaphor** (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). When a child or a second-language learner acquires such idioms, they first connect the animal image to real-life experience, and only later transfer it to human qualities.

Key aspects include:

Animal-based idioms play an important role in the development of metaphorical thinking in Uzbek children.

Age factor is crucial in acquisition: younger learners interpret idioms based on literal animal traits, while older learners begin to perceive their symbolic meanings.

In the educational process, the use of visualization, textual input, and contextual exercises significantly enhances the comprehension of idioms.

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