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**TOMCAT, KOCUR AND КОТЯПА: IN SEARCH OF
METAPHORICAL EXTENSIONS IN THE FIELD CATS IN
ENGLISH, POLISH AND RUSSIAN**

The main goal set to this paper is to provide sample contrastive analysis of metaphorical extensions pertaining to the selected constitutive members of the semantic field **CATS** in English, Polish and Russian. In the scope of our interest the following questions will be addressed:

- 1) to what extent do the objective facts concerning cats influence the way people perceive them,
- 2) are the cultural similarities and differences of English, Polish and Russian reflected in the linguistic material,
- 3) what is the linguistic picture of a cat in the three cultures represented by the three languages taken into account here.

An attempt will be made to provide an answer to the first problem enumerated above through analysis of the metaphorical extensions and comparison of the results with data, gathered from various encyclopedias and other data sources. A comparative study of a picture of the world reflected in the animal metaphors analyzed shall be applied to resolve the second problem enumerated above. Finally, the linguistic picture of a cat in the English, Polish and Russian languages will be constructed on the basis of the most unequivocal semantic features of the lexemes involved.

It should be emphasized that this survey investigates merely metaphors of what a user of English calls *cat* and a scientist relates to as *Felis catus*. It has been shown on numerous occasions (see, for example, Wilkins (1981), Kiełtyka (2005a, 2005), Kiełtyka and Kleparski (2005a, 2005b) and Kleparski (2003)), the place the animal occupies in people's hearts and – thus – in language results in the existence of rich vocabulary applied to name it. In recent linguistic literature, metaphorical extensions of meaning have been dealt with *in extenso*

and they still remain at the centre of interest for many students of language, both synchronic and diachronic (see, among others, Dobrzyńska (1994), Bartwicka (1992), Kleparski (1990, 1997), Lakoff & Johnson (1980)). It is not our intention to examine the process in detail, but rather our aim is to outline its most significant points for this survey.

Most frequently, metaphor is viewed as principally a way of conceiving an object in terms of another and its primary function is understanding. The pattern of a metaphor can be described in the following manner: *x is similar to y in terms of f* (see Polański 1993:328). In the process of communication, among all the features of *y* the recipient of the (spoken or written) text chooses only those ones which can be applied to *x* in the particular situation, for example the storm is similar to a beast in terms of <rapidity> and <danger>. Likewise, John may be similar to an elephant in terms of <huge size>, therefore the storm may be metaphorically denoted to as *beast* and John as *elephant*. As shown by a number of recent studies, it is fairly obvious that the most clear and intelligible metaphors are those denoting human beings, like *hedgehog* – ‘the one that is regardless of others’ feelings’ or *donkey* ‘a stupid, silly person’.

The members of each lexicon of a natural language can be divided into certain thematic groups. This is described in the theory of field structure initiated by Trier’s (1931) concept of **linguistic field** known to be based on Saussure’s (1916) theory of language as a synchronic system of networks held together by differences, oppositions and distinctive values. According to Trier (1931), fields are linguistic realities existing between single words and the total vocabulary. They are parts of a whole and combine words of similar meaning into higher units. A **common concept** characterises all semantic fields and the semantic component common to all the members of a given field is often referred to as the **common denominator** of meaning.

Notice that to a certain extent, the idea is based on **folk knowledge** (Wierzbicka (1985)). The classifications are not justifiable scientifically, since they depend on common sense knowledge and everyday experience with a particular object than its scientific considerations. Berlin *et al.* (1973:214) identify five independent and hierarchically organised ethnobiological categories of living things:

1. unique beginner (e.g. animal, plant),
2. life form (e.g. tree, bird),
3. folk genera (e.g. dog, cat),
4. specific taxa (e.g. spaniel, Siamese cat),
5. varietal (e.g. cocker spaniel).¹

¹ For details see Apresjan (1974), Berlin (1992), Wierzbicka (1985), Cruse (1986), Martsa (1999).

This issue seems to be naturally related to the categories of **macro-** and **microfields**, the first being more general (e.g. the semantic field **ANIMALS** includes such lexical elements, as *tiger, bird, fox, fish, cow*, etc), while the latter tends to be more restricted and more specific (e.g. the semantic field **CATS**, contains *cat, tomcat, kitten*, etc). In short, one may say that a macrofield consists of a certain number of microfields, however a microfield may become a macrofield for other, more restricted (micro) fields (**MAMMALS – CATS, DOGS, WHALES**, etc).

So, on closer inquiry it becomes apparent that the structure of the semantic field **CATS** contains similar classes of lexemes in all the languages targeted here, that is to say the central entity (*cat; kot; кошка*), lexemes denoting young animals of the kind (*kitten, pussy; kotek, kociak; котёнок, кошечка*, etc), the adult male animal (*tomcat, tom; kocur; кот, котяра*), and only in English and Polish – the female animal (*queen*;² *kocica, kotka*). Notice that the Russian material does not include the corresponding lexeme, as the main unit of the semantic field implies the semantic feature <feminine>.³ It is easily observable that in English the lexeme *cat* is epicene,⁴ and the metaphorical extensions seem to go in both directions – some are employed to denote a male and some to denote a female.

As mentioned before, within the scope of our interest there is the comparison of linguistic data linked to the facts stemming from the nature of extralinguistic reality. This naturally requires, among others, a definition of what a *cat* actually is. To meet this need one may say that it is a member of the cat family (*Felines*) and it is predatory by nature, it hunts by stealth and catches its prey with sudden short bursts of speed and foot pads help cats stalk their prey in silence. When and where the cat was first domesticated is unknown, the probability is that various small wild felines were tamed in different parts of the world about 5,000 years ago.⁵ Sanskrit writings 3,000 years old speak of the cat as a pet in India, but it was Egypt where the cat was first domesticated. From Egypt it spread slowly into Europe. It is not mentioned by any ancient European writers until the first century AD. In Central Europe the cat was actually unknown before the 13th century; in Poland it replaced the domesticated weasel (cf. Kopaliński 1998:260).

² Although this meaning of the lexeme *queen* – ‘a mature female cat kept especially for breeding’ is not mentioned in all of the dictionaries analyzed for this survey; compare, for example, *LDELIC, LDCE*.

³ Ожегов (1998) mentions the following meanings of the lexeme *кошка* – 1. a mammal predator of the felinae family; 2. a domestic animal of the family; 3. female domestic cat (and metaphorical meanings 4. – 6.). But still the word can be used to denote both – male and female cat.

⁴ To name a female cat one can use the term *she-cat* though no English dictionary consulted mentions this term.

⁵ In comparison the dog was domesticated about 14,000 years ago. On this issue see www.bartleby.com.

Notice that the cat has long played a crucial role in religion – Egyptians deified the cat as Bast, the goddess of moonlight, fertility, wisdom, hunting, and daylight.⁶ From the Middle Ages onward the cat has been associated with sorcery and witchcraft, and the superstitions regarding cats, common in all countries, are innumerable. Persecutions often took extremely vicious forms, and throughout the ages cats have been more cruelly treated than any other animal.⁷ The spirit of independence, attributable to the solitary nature of the cat's wild ancestors, has remained with the cat through all of its period of domestication. Other characteristic features of cats are:

- 1) purring – a low continuous humming sound associated with pleasure or contentment,
- 2) a playful nature, keen sight and hearing,
- 3) the ability to land on their feet when they fall or are dropped.

An interesting observation that may be made is that the descriptions of cats in Egyptian times sound amazingly similar to our modern treatment, with the fortunate exception of punishment by death for anyone killing a cat. The following *Figure 1* presents all the analyzed lexemes from the field **CATS** in English, Polish and Russian.⁸

English	Polish	Russian
<i>cat</i>	<i>kot</i>	<i>кошка</i>
<i>kitten</i>	<i>kotek</i>	<i>котёнок</i>
<i>kitty</i>	<i>kociak</i>	<i>кошечка</i>
<i>pussy</i>	<i>kocię</i>	
<i>puss</i>		
<i>tomcat</i>	<i>kocur</i>	<i>кот</i>
<i>tom</i>		<i>котяра</i>
<i>queen</i>	<i>kocica</i>	
	<i>kotka</i>	

Figure 1. CATS data from English, Polish and Russian.

⁶ Egyptians used the same word *mau* to denote both cat and light (see Bayley 1996: 225).

⁷ Cats were persecuted possibly because they were associated with the 'old religion', pre-Christian polytheism and animism, and therefore with witchcraft. Cats were often solemnly put on trial, tortured and then burned alive. Public celebrations were often climaxed by the public burning of closed baskets full of cats. To ensure good luck, it was a custom to seal cats alive in the foundations of buildings (Kopaliński, *Britannica, Americana*). With the 20th century cats regained their position as creatures of affection, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries, where it is catered for by a well-developed cat industry and Cat Clubs.

⁸ The analysed material has been checked in English, Polish and Russian dictionaries, both printed and electronic editions.

It is fairly obvious that our folk understanding of what animals are like is basically metaphorical. Lakoff and Turner (1989: 194) argue that:

Animals act instinctively, and different kinds of animals have different kinds of instinctive behavior. We comprehend their behavior in terms of human behavior, and we use the language of human character traits to describe such behavior. Cleverness, loyalty, courage, rudeness, dependability, and fickleness are human traits, and when we attribute such character traits to animals we are comprehending the behavior of those animals metaphorically in human terms.

English	Polish	Russian
<i>cat</i> - 'a malicious woman' - 'a player or devotee to jazz' - 'a regular guy; fellow, man'	<i>kot</i> - a young soldier	
<i>pussy</i> - 'the female partner in sexual intercourse' - 'an insulting word for a man who is weak or not brave' - 'a person who lives in another's house as an inmate' <i>puss</i> - 'a girl or woman' <i>kitten</i> - 'a young girl, usually as a form of address'	<i>kotek</i> - form of address for somebody you like <i>kociak</i> - tenderly about a nice woman	
		<i>kom</i> - a greedy lover of sweets - a man, who lives on women's account, a libertine
	<i>kotka</i> - a young, nice woman, girl <i>kocica</i> - a woman whose behavior provokes men	

Figure 2. Metaphorical extensions in the field **CATS**.

Recent research studies such as, for example Wilkins (1981), Kiełtyka and Kleparski (2005a, 2005b and forthcoming), Kleparski (1997, 2002) indicate that

most animal metaphors are targeted at the conceptual domain **HUMAN BEING**. Therefore, our material has been divided into two groups – metaphors that are applied with reference to human beings classed into one category and another group of miscellaneous metaphorical extensions.

As a result of our inquiry relating to animal metaphors affecting the domain **HUMAN BEING**, it has been found that the metaphorical productivity of this field differs greatly in the three languages compared. And so, in English four lexemes seem to be metaphorically productive, yielding altogether 8 metaphors denoting human beings, in Polish the numbers are 5 and 5 while in Russian the numbers are 1 and 2 accordingly. The direction of the semantic changes enables us to formulate some partial conclusions. And so, in English there is apparently no clear pattern common to all or to the majority of meanings, whereas in Polish two metaphors activate almost the same semantic properties (*kotek*, *kotka*), whilst the third (*kociak*) is still very close to them. The meaning of *kocica*, one may say, is also closely connected to the meaning of the lexeme *kociak*.

English	Polish	Russian
<i>cat</i> - ‘a strong tackle used to hoist an anchor to the cathead of the ship’	<i>kot</i> - (in plural) dust - (hunters’ slang) a rabbit - a small anchor, used on boats or for retrieving small objects from underwater	<i>коушка</i> - a whip of several knotted cords fastened to a handle, used formely for punishing people - a hook with three or more arms, used on boats or for retrieving small objects from underwater - a kind of metal tooth, attached to shoes in rockclimbing
<i>pussy</i> - ‘a catkin of the pussy willow’ - ‘the female pudendum’ - ‘sexual intercourse’ - ‘(austral.) a rabbit’ - ‘(criminals’ slang) a fur garment’	<i>kotek</i> - (naut.) part of nautical equipment, preserving sail from tearing	<i>котёнок</i> - a bunny
	<i>kotka</i> - (usually plural) catkin	

Figure 3. Metaphorical extensions of **CATS**-related terms to other domains.

The general rule is that only the central unit of the semantic field activates semantic properties clearly different from those, characterising lexemes mentioned above. It is fairly obvious that the Russian material is too limited to allow us to formulate any generalizations. Apart from this, notice that animal metaphors are not merely used with reference to human beings, but also other domains. *Figure 3* (above) presents metaphorical extensions of this type.

As visualised in *Figure 3*, both the productivity and directions of metaphorical changes pertaining to non-human associations show higher degree of similarity than in the previous group. Although some meanings are specific for one language only, there are several meaning threads that seem to originate from the same or very similar metaphorical uses (compare: 'a rabbit', 'a catkin', 'a whip', nautical equipment).

Also, in the analyzed material one observes a certain number of metaphorical extensions of verbs linked to the semantic field **CATS**. It seems that some revealing conclusions can be drawn from closer analysis of such such English verbs as *to cat* 'to vomit', *to tomcat* 'to pursue women for sexual gratification', *to puss* 'to move or act like a cat, silently', *to cat/cat around* 'to search for a sexual mate'. It turns out that in all groups of metaphorical extensions in English the most common semantic feature is 'connected with sex', whereas in Polish and Russian this semantic feature is activated only in two cases, that is *kocica* and *kom*, 'nice' being the most popular in Polish.

It is fairly evident that some of the semantic features activated are based merely on a subjective perception of the world. It does not really matter that contemporary science refuses the courage of a lion, the slyness of a fox or the stubbornness of a donkey, and it is of no importance that users of a language realise this fact because those features have become symbolic and have participated in a number of metaphorical processes. In contrast to objective characteristics, like the size or colour, the features mentioned above are typical for a given culture group. Their coexistence in two or more languages is a sign of a common ancestry of these nations, or interactions between these cultures. To conclude, one may say that the more similarities, the closer the relationship of investigated groups.

It seems that the present survey allows us to draw some other partial conclusions. An attempt has been made to show that the three languages under investigation reveal certain common characteristics, at least this can be evidenced on the basis of the metaphorical extensions denoting non-humans. The influence of cats on people's minds and languages appears to be the strongest in English, similarly in Polish while it seems to be much weaker in Russian. This can be proved by the metaphorical productivity of the field in question. Not only the number of metaphorical extensions, but also the appearance of similar semantic features in the semantic structure of figurative

meanings seem to place Polish culture closer to English than to Russian. It seems that the explanation of this state of affairs should be sought for in the history of the cats' conquest of Europe rather than in the history of these three cultures.

In the case of most of the metaphorical uses of the lexemes investigated here a clear motivation of such processes can be traced. Let us consider the example of English *cat* applied to name a player or a devotee of jazz music which has probably been derived from the 'songs' of male cats in mating time. Note that traces of this can also be found in the Polish phrase *kocia muzyka* used to name unpleasant sounds. Metaphorical extensions based on the semantic features 'nice', 'playful' (like in cases of *puss*, *kitten*, *kotek* or *kociak*) reflect the cats' predisposition to play, to fawn or soft fur, pleasant to touch. Yet, there remain several metaphorical meanings that are based on features subjectively attached to cats.

And, finally, we seem to enter the world of symbols. As *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* informs us, cat is a symbol of the female sexual organs, thus in English we observe the metaphorical meaning of *pussy* 'vulva,'⁹ and – probably derived from it – the word denoting the female partner in (homo)sexual intercourse. Apart from this, English *cat* is also an insulting word for a man who is weak and not brave, a homosexual. On the other hand, Polish material shows that cats also play a very important role in sailors' superstitions (see Kopaliński 1990), which might provide some explanation for nautical metaphors of *cat*; *kot*, *kotek*, *kouka* in the three languages. There are also quite a few nautical terms, that is collocations with the lexeme *cat*, like *cat-boat* 'a small masted boat', *catwalk* 'the narrow walk-way on a ship' or *cat o' nine tails* 'whippings'.

To a large extent, how exactly is the cat perceived in each individual culture can be clearly seen from the linguistic picture of the world. One may say that the most frequently activated semantic features and those concerning the strongest feelings and emotions create a set of characteristics attributed to the cat in a given society. In English *cat* is associated with women, usually in terms of sexuality, a sexual intercourse and the female sexual organs. The semantic feature <furry>, and thus <attractive>, is also frequently triggered. In Polish the most powerful associations are <pleasant> and <female>. They usually produce positive emotions and sometimes association linked to sensuality. On the contrary, in Russian culture the animal is seen as lazy, greedy and abusive creature, also a keen climber.

⁹ Interesting to note, Gnostics claim that a cat is the same in comparison with the dog, as women's character (tenderness, cunningness, sensuality) in comparison with men's. The unusual women's fear of small and harmless mice they explain through symbols: cat – vulva, mouse – penis (cf. Kopaliński 1990).

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