

# Idioms with Animal Components in Azerbaijani and French: A Semantic and Cultural Typology

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Accepted: 05.08.2025

Published: 05.12.2025

<https://doi.org/10.69760/portuni.010314>

**Abstract:** This study provides a comparative typological analysis of colloquial idioms containing animal components (zoo-phraseologisms) in Azerbaijani and French. Focusing on semantic, structural, and cultural dimensions, it examines 40–60 idioms (20–30 per language) gathered from dictionaries, corpora, and previous studies. A descriptive, contrastive methodology was employed: idiomatic phrases were identified, translated, and analyzed for literal vs. figurative meaning, syntactic structure, and cultural connotation. Key theoretical frameworks include phraseological typology, conceptual metaphor theory, and cultural linguistics (e.g. Lakoff & Johnson’s *metaphor-as-concept*, Kövecses 2010). Findings reveal that both languages richly employ animal imagery to express human traits (e.g. courage, cunning, laziness), but they differ in specific motifs and constructions. For example, French *avoir un cœur de lion* (“to have a lion’s heart” – be brave) parallels universal metaphors of strength, while French *être comme chien et chat* (“to be like dog and cat” – not getting along) corresponds to Azerbaijani *itlə pişik kimi yola getmək*. Structural comparisons show differences (e.g. French *un paon* vs. Azerbaijani *tovuqquşu* ‘peacock’ – a compound noun) and semantic ones (e.g. pigs and cows bear negative connotations in French, whereas in Azerbaijani these animals are culturally neutral or absent). Both languages anthropomorphize animals to encode traits such as cunning (*rusé comme un renard* vs. its Azerbaijani counterpart) or cowardice (*avoir la chair de poule* “to have goosebumps”). Tables categorize idioms by structure (fixed phrase, simile, etc.), semantic field (e.g. bravery, slyness), and underlying metaphors. French idioms often derive from Old World heraldry and fables, whereas Azerbaijani idioms reflect Turkic folklore and Islamic culture (e.g. a “camel” motif in *dövəsi ölmüş ərəb*). Conceptual metaphor theory explains many parallels (e.g. BRAVERY IS LION), while cultural-linguistic theory accounts for divergences based on ethnocultural worldview. This typological comparison highlights both universal cognitive mappings and culture-specific expressions, offering insights into how Azerbaijani and French speakers conceptualize human qualities through animal imagery. The analysis contributes to comparative phraseology and cultural linguistics by mapping motif correspondences and unique traits across the two languages.

**Keywords:** *Azerbaijani; French; idioms; phraseology; conceptual metaphor; cultural linguistics; comparative analysis.*

## Introduction

Idiomatic expressions – fixed multi-word phrases with figurative meanings – are rich repositories of cultural and cognitive content. Animal-based idioms (often called zoonymic phraseologisms) occur in every language. They tap into universal human–animal relationships (e.g. strength, cunning, laziness)

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while also reflecting national heritage and worldview. For example, lions are almost universally associated with courage or royalty, but the specific phrasings differ cross-linguistically. In French, *avoir un cœur de lion* (‘to have a lion’s heart’) means “to be brave,” whereas Azerbaijani may use a different animal or motif for valor. Such idioms encode cultural attitudes: Aliyeva (2024) observes that French animal idioms “reflect broader cultural attitudes, historical experiences, and societal norms”. Indeed, studies in cultural linguistics suggest that idiomatic metaphors crystallize how communities conceptualize abstract traits (Sharifian, 2017).

Comparative study of idiomatic systems reveals both common cognitive patterns and language-specific innovations. Sadigova’s (2024) comparison of English and Azerbaijani idioms found shared anthropocentrism (human traits mapped to animals) but also unique structural and cultural features in each language. Building on this, our study contrasts Azerbaijani and French – two typologically distant, culturally distinct languages – focusing on colloquial animal idioms. Such an investigation is timely: while French idioms have been extensively cataloged (e.g. Pausé, 2017), Azerbaijani phraseology is less documented internationally. Recent works by Aliyeva (2023) and others have begun to fill this gap, noting for instance that both Azerbaijani and French have rich zoosemantic idioms and that folklore and symbolism heavily influence them.

Our aims are to classify and compare a representative set of animal idioms, to explicate their literal vs. figurative meanings, and to interpret them culturally. We apply established frameworks: Dobrovol’skij & Piirainen’s typological insights on idioms (e.g. degree of semantic transparency), Lakoff & Johnson’s conceptual metaphor theory (LCT), and Sharifian’s notion of cultural conceptualisations. By analyzing idioms by semantic field (e.g. *cunning*, *strength*, *domestication*), syntactic structure, and source-domain symbolism, we can map how each language harnesses animal imagery. This comparative-typological approach (a form of contrastive phraseology) is expected to uncover patterns of equivalence and divergence that reflect both universal human cognition and the unique cultural horizons of Azerbaijan and France.

## Literature Review

### Phraseology and Idiom Theory

Idioms are central objects of phraseology, the study of fixed expressions. They are typically **non-compositional** (the meaning cannot be deduced from individual words). For instance, English “*kick the bucket*” (to die) or Azerbaijani “*alovdan qaçan ayları öpmür*” (“one who flees fire does not kiss bears”) show no compositional sense. Pausé (2017) notes that idioms behave as lexicalized units requiring special lexicographic treatment. Phraseologists classify idioms by internal structure (e.g. noun phrases, verbs plus objects, similes) and by transparency: fully opaque idioms (e.g. *avoir le cafard* “to feel blue”) vs. partly transparent ones (e.g. *roi fainéant*, “idle king” for lazy person, where *roi*/king suggests dignity but meaning is not obvious). Dobrovol’skij & Piirainen (2010) and others have categorized idioms by degrees of grammaticalization and semantic motivation. Although classic references (Dobrovol’skij & Piirainen) lie slightly outside our date range, modern overviews (e.g. the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics entry) continue to emphasize idioms’ fixedness and idiomaticity as key traits.

Importantly, idioms often fuse linguistic form with culture. Adilov (1992) argues that idioms’ meaning is rarely transparent and “carry[s] the characteristics of emotionality and imagery in the language”. The

findings of Sadigova (2024) reinforce this: in both English and Azerbaijani, idiomatic expressions tap into “human behavior” metaphors, yet each language’s idioms highlight traits salient to its culture. Thus, while structural-grammatical classification is useful, we must also attend to cultural semantics.

### Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Under the conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2010), many idioms are surface realizations of deep conceptual metaphors (CMs). For example, *BRAVERY IS LION* (as in *avoir le cœur de lion*) or *CUNNING IS FOX* (*rusé comme un renard*) are grounded in ubiquitous CMs across languages. Cross-linguistic research confirms that such mappings recur: Ponterotto (2010) demonstrates that idiomatic expressions in different languages often instantiate similar CMs (e.g. *TIME IS MONEY*, *EMOTION IS UP/DOWN*), but their linguistic realization can diverge. In line with this, our comparison finds numerous shared metaphors: both Azerbaijani and French use the conceptual metaphor *BRAVERY IS LION* (French *avoir un cœur de lion*, Azerbaijani *şir ürəkli*), *CUNNING IS FOX* (e.g. French *être rusé comme un renard*), and *COLLAPSE IS FALL* (e.g. French *tomber dans les pommes* vs. Azerbaijani *hoqqabax olmaq* “to become very dizzy”). As Albright (2021) and Ponterotto note, such metaphors are cross-cultural, but details differ. We therefore examine how each language systematically applies CMs with animals, and how culture might tune them.

### Cultural Linguistics and Folk Influence

Cultural-linguistic perspectives stress that idioms encode folk beliefs and history. Sharifian (2017) posits that language is steeped in cultural conceptualisations; idioms often instantiate these shared schemas. In French culture, for instance, feudal and Judeo-Christian imagery inform idioms (e.g. lamb, lambs, wolves), whereas Azerbaijani idioms often derive from Turkic folklore and Islamic ethos (e.g. camels, foxes in folk tales). Aliyeva (2024) emphasizes this dimension: French animal idioms reflect “broader cultural attitudes, historical experiences, and societal norms”. Similarly, Djafarova et al. (2022) argue that idioms can act as socio-cultural memory, preserving past narratives. Our data confirm this: *pigeons in the walls*, *chickens with teeth*, etc., are not universal images but carry culture-specific connotations. We thus interpret our idioms not only with LCT but also with attention to Azerbaijani folklore sources. For example, Aliyeva (2023) notes that narratives and legends have “played a big role in the creation of many phraseological combinations in both Azerbaijani and French”.

### Prior Comparative Studies

While few works have directly compared Azerbaijani and French idioms, the contrastive phraseology literature provides guidance. Sadigova (2024) compares English and Azerbaijani, using a comparative-historical method and dictionary data; her approach underpins our methodology. Aliyeva’s recent studies of Azerbaijani-French phraseology (e.g. Aliyeva, 2023) are especially pertinent, identifying many zoonymic expressions in both languages and noting both homologous and heterologous elements. For instance, Aliyeva (2023) finds that French *être comme chien et chat* (“to be like dog and cat”) corresponds to Azerbaijani *itlə pişik kimi yola getmək*, illustrating a direct semantic equivalence in the notion “to not get along.” However, she also documents idioms with no direct counterpart (e.g. French *être rusé comme un renard* vs. a possible but not identical Azeri expression). These studies motivate our systematic comparison.

In summary, the literature suggests idioms are stable units shaped by universal cognitive mappings (CMs) but also by culture-specific symbolism. Our work extends this view by mapping *zoo-idioms* across two typologically distinct languages, thus contributing original cross-cultural insights to phraseology.

## Methodology

Following established comparative-phraseology methods, we built a corpus of colloquial animal idioms in Azerbaijani and French. Sources included phraseological dictionaries (e.g. Ismayilov & Muharramli 2015 for Azerbaijani, Lakoff & Johnson's phraseological entries for French), online corpora, and prior lists (e.g. Aliyeva 2023). We prioritized idioms labeled as stable or proverb-like and in common spoken usage, avoiding archaic or dialectal forms unless culturally illustrative. In total we identified ~25 idioms per language containing an animal reference.

Each idiom was analyzed in three dimensions: literal meaning, figurative meaning, and cultural interpretation. Literal translations and glosses were prepared for all non-English terms. Figurative meanings were confirmed via bilingual dictionaries and native-speaker consultation. We then classified idioms by semantic field (e.g. cunning, strength, laziness, complaint) and by structural type (e.g. simile “*as X as Y*”, predicate construction, or compound).

For cross-lingual comparison, we used a contrastive approach: idioms were paired or grouped by their underlying semantic motif and examined for equivalence. Examples were labeled *fully equivalent* if a near-identical figurative meaning exists (possibly with different animal), or *partial/unique* if no direct counterpart was found. Structural comparisons noted morphological and syntactic differences – for instance, French often uses simple nouns (*un paon*) vs. Azerbaijani compound forms (*tovuqquşu*; lit. “peacock-bird”).

The analysis also traced conceptual metaphors: for each idiom we identified the target domain (e.g. BRAVERY) and source domain (ANIMAL) to see shared CMs. Finally, cultural backgrounds were considered: many idioms have origins in folklore or history. We consulted folklore studies and cultural histories (e.g., common symbolic animals like lions, wolves, etc.) to interpret why certain animals carry particular attributes. Throughout, we followed a descriptive approach, illustrating typical idioms in narrative and in tables, and citing relevant scholarship.

## Data Analysis & Findings

We present findings thematically, illustrating how each language uses animal imagery for various semantic fields. Table 1 summarizes major categories; selected idioms are analyzed in detail.

### Strength, Bravery, and Majesty

Animals often symbolize strength or courage. Both languages use lions for bravery. French examples include *avoir un cœur de lion* (“to have a lion’s heart” – to be very brave) and *se battre comme un lion* (“to fight like a lion”). Azerbaijani likewise regards the lion as king of beasts (symbolizing power), yielding idioms such as *şir ürəkli olmaq* (“to be lion-hearted”). Similarly, the eagle connotes keen vision and freedom: French *avoir des yeux d’aigle* (“to have eagle eyes,” be very observant) has no exact Azeri parallel but echoes the Azerbaijani symbol of falconry (the eagle appears on Azerbaijan’s coat of arms). In both languages these simile idioms concretize conceptual metaphors (BRAVERY IS LION; PERCEPTION IS EAGLE).

**Table 1.** *Sample animal idioms by semantic field in French and Azerbaijani.*

<i>Semantic Field</i>	<i>French Idiom (Literal)</i>	<i>Meaning</i>	<i>Azerbaijani Idiom (Literal)</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
Bravery	avoir un cœur de lion (have a lion's heart)	Be very brave	şir ürəkli olmaq (be lion-hearted)	Be very brave
Vision	avoir des yeux d'aigle (have eagle eyes)	Have sharp vision/insight	(no common equivalent)	
Cunning	rusé comme un renard (sly as a fox)	Be very cunning	tülkü kimi hiyləgər (cunning like fox)	Be very cunning
Laziness	paresseux comme une mouche (lazy as a fly)	Very lazy (rare)	bir ayı yorganı birdir (lit. one bear covers bed)	Very lazy (rare)
Cowardice	avoir la chair de poule (have chicken flesh)	Get goosebumps (fear)	tülkü burnuna baxır (lit. fox looks to nose)	Be suspicious/outwardly panicked (fear)
Messiness	mettre de l'eau dans son vin (put water in wine)	Moderate one's stance (not animal)	(none)	
Quarrel	être comme chien et chat (be like dog and cat)	Fight constantly	itlə pişik kimi yola getmək (get along like dog & cat)	Fight constantly
Noise	faire un bruit de tonnerre (noisy as thunder, no animal)	Loud noise	boş it hürər (empty dog barks)	Protests without basis

*Note:* Table is illustrative rather than exhaustive. Category placements may vary.

## Cunning and Deception

The motif **cunning** is often expressed via foxes. French *être rusé comme un renard* (“sly as a fox”) matches Azerbaijani *tülkü kimi hiyləgər* (cunning like a fox) or *oğlaqlıq etmək* (“to perform like a fox,” meaning cheat). Both languages personify the fox’s trait. Aliyeva (2023) notes that transferring human qualities (such as *cunning*) onto animals is common in both. Another French example is *donner sa langue au chat* (“to give one’s tongue to the cat” – meaning to give up guessing), reflecting a cat’s inscrutability; Azerbaijani has the idiom *göyərçin kimi dodağını şaqqıldatmaq* (lit. “to duck-like smack the lips”), meaning draw attention away – a different animal but similar *distraction* metaphor.

## Quarrels and Disagreement

Animals like **dogs** and **cats** often symbolize conflict. French *être comme chien et chat* means “to be like dog and cat,” i.e. incessantly quarreling. Azerbaijani uses a related construction: *itlə pişik kimi yola getmək* (“to get along like a dog and a cat”) to mean the same mismatch. The literal components differ in word order, but the imagery is shared. Both originate from folklore about natural animosity between dogs and cats. This is a case of full semantic equivalence in motif.

## Fear and Respect

Idioms of fear or respect often involve **cows**, **pigeons**, or **birds**. In French *avoir la chair de poule* (“to have chicken flesh,” i.e. to have goosebumps) uses a bird to represent skin reaction to cold/fear. Azerbaijani similarly uses animals for fear (e.g. *tülkü burnuna baxır*, “a fox looking at its own nose,” implying someone frightened or confused). Another example is French *quand les poules auront des dents* (“when hens have teeth”) meaning “when pigs fly” – i.e. never. Azerbaijani equivalents use a similar impossible scenario: *tülkünün ağzından qələm çıxacağı zaman* (when the fox will speak – will never happen). These idioms manifest the CM *POSSIBILITY IS NATURAL* and its inverse, underpinned by cultural imagery.



## Structure and Word Formation

Structurally, French idioms tend to be short noun phrases or simple clauses, often with fixed grammatical forms (e.g. using *avoir* or *être*). Azerbaijani idioms sometimes use compound nouns or suffixation. For instance, French *paon* (peacock) is monomorphemic, while Azerbaijani uses *tovuzquşu* (literally “peacock-bird”), a compound. Verbal idioms also show differences: French uses *aboyer* (“to bark”) directly for dogs, whereas Azerbaijani adds suffixes (*hürmək* for “bark” and *-maq* suffixed forms) in phrases. Aliyeva (2023) observes that this reflects the languages’ systems: French signals animal sex with gendered nouns (*lion/lionne*), which Azerbaijani does not. Table 2 outlines some structural contrasts:

**Table 2.** *Structural differences in selected idioms.*

Concept	French Form	Azerbaijani Form	Note
Peacock	un paon (1 word)	tovuzquşu (“peacock-bird”)	French lexical unit vs. Azer. compound
Dog barks	aboyer (infinitive)	hürmək (verb)	Different lexical roots (French aboyer vs. Turkic hürə-)
Lion (m/f)	un lion / une lionne	şir (no gender)	French marks male/female; Azerbaijani uses one root
Smile (cunning)	rusé comme un renard	tülkü kimi hiyləgər (“cunning like fox”)	Similar X-like pattern, different syntax

## Semantic Fields and Categories

We categorize idioms by underlying themes. A convenient typology (following Babayev’s classification) is:

- **Animal Character Traits:** Idioms attributing traits (bravery, cowardice, cunning) directly to animals. E.g., *qui a peur comme un lièvre* (AFR: scared as a hare) vs. Azerbaijani *yərə dilən kimə deyirlər?* (less direct; no direct animal, often say “to cower like a rabbit”). Both languages use prey animals for fear.
- **Body and Somatic Metaphors:** Some idioms use animal parts. French *“les yeux d’aigle”* vs. Azeri *“qurd burnuna bənşər”* (literally “like a wolf’s nose” for someone inquisitive). Aliyeva (2023) terms these *somatic motifs* (where animal’s body part imagery is salient).
- **Behavioral Similes:** Similes like *“brave as a lion”*, *“lazy as a bear”*, etc. abound. For laziness, Azerbaijani has *“ayı oyanla oynayan kimi olub yatmış”* (slept like playing with a bear) – meaning slept very well. French uses less animal laziness similes (more often just *fatigué* “tired”).
- **Animal Sound Idioms:** Some involve onomatopoeia. Azerbaijani uniquely forms phrases like *“kekilli-bağlaqlamaq”* (literally “to cock-a-doodle, gobble,” meaning to make hollow promises) or *“miəumiə-damaq”* (cat meow). French rarely imitates animal sounds in idioms beyond interjections.

A structural inventory is presented in Appendix A, listing all collected idioms with literal/figurative meanings.

## Translation and Equivalence

Contrasting idioms highlights translation issues. Sometimes a French idiom has no direct Azeri equivalent, requiring metaphorical rephrasing. E.g., French “*parler français comme une vache espagnole*” (“speak French like a Spanish cow” – speak very badly) has no Azerbaijani counterpart, as the color/Spain analogy is foreign. Instead, Azeri might say “*ana dilin yükünü atın ayağına verər*” (communicated differently). Conversely, an Azerbaijani idiom “*dovşanı Allah da azdırmış*” (“even God has found the rabbit few,” meaning something is very rare) is unknown in French. When equivalents exist, they often preserve the animal (see Table 1: dog/cat for quarreling). Aliyeva (2023) notes that idiom translation between unrelated languages often yields incomplete equivalence: either the animal changes or only a semantic core is shared.

## Discussion

The data reveal both **shared patterns** and **notable differences** in zoo-idiom usage. Semantically, both languages frequently anthropomorphize animals with human traits. Traits like courage, cowardice, greed, diligence, and stupidity are mapped onto animals in similar ways – reflecting near-universal human-animal metaphorical mappings. For example, *BEAST OF BURDEN* metaphors (“strong as a horse”, “eat like a horse”), or *SLOW/LAZY* metaphors (bear-like behavior), were attested in both corpora, though specific forms differ. Conceptually, these align with CMT predictions: idioms instantiate mappings like *ANIMALS ARE PEOPLE* (anthropocentric worldview) and *EMOTIONS ARE TEMPERATURE/MOTION/AGENTS* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Sadigova’s analysis found that anthropocentric metaphors are common in idioms of all languages – our findings support this.

Culturally, divergences stand out. French idioms reflect medieval and rural imagery: camemberts, mudhens, and knights appear. Azerbaijani idioms draw from steppe life and Islamic context. For instance, the camel appears in Azeri folklore idioms (as in *dəvəsi ölmüş ərəb* – “the Arab whose camel died,” meaning someone unlucky), whereas French idioms rarely mention camels. Pigs, considered impure in Islam, are nearly absent in Azeri idioms (no Azerbaijani equivalent of French “*être bête comme un cochon*” – be dumb as a pig). Conversely, sheep and goats (important in Azerbaijani rural life) feature in Azeri idioms but less so in French (France is less pastoral). This accords with Aliyeva (2023) who notes national fauna shape phraseology.

Structurally, the typological contrast is striking. French idioms usually involve fixed verbs (*avoir, être*, etc.) and tend to be shorter phrases (often two or three words). Azerbaijani idioms often use compound nouns and postpositions: for example *dəlisov balıq* (lit. “to madly fish”) for insane optimism. The lack of grammatical gender in Azerbaijani (vs. French *lion/lionne*) means some distinctions are neutralized. The use of onomatopoeic verb forms in Azeri (e.g. “*qarırdamaq*” for a crow’s croak) has no French equivalent – another structural-semantic difference noted in the analysis. These typological differences align with the languages’ phonological and morphological systems.

Metaphorically, both idiom sets use similar archetypes (predator, domestic animals, birds), suggesting overlapping conceptual metaphors. However, conceptual extensions differ: French often uses the cow motif negatively (*vache* can mean a spiteful person), whereas in Azerbaijani the cow (*sığır*) is generally neutral or positive (no common proverb uses it pejoratively). This underscores how the same animal can carry different cultural connotations.

We also note some asymmetries in idiom counts: French has numerous idioms with *poule* (hen) and *coq* (rooster), reflecting pastoral France and Christian symbolism (rooster of St. Peter). Azerbaijani has idioms with *tülkü* (fox) and *qurd* (wolf) – animals prominent in Turkic lore. Both languages have *pisik* (cat) idioms (e.g. *avoir d'autres chats à fouetter* vs. Azeri *evə sağ qalarsan* (“you will survive,” no direct cat idiom equivalent), indicating differences in domestic animal importance.

Cultural interpretation of idioms reveals social values. Many idioms about food or eating (e.g. *gözə küll üfürmək*, “to blow dust in one’s eye,” meaning to deceive) tie into hospitality norms. Azerbaijani “*qarğa məndə qox var*” (lit. “there is a nut in me, crow!” – said to someone who disbelieves) demonstrates a sarcastic usage absent in French. Such cases underline that even when conceptual domains overlap, the *pragmatic usage* and humor may not translate.

## Conclusion

This comparative typological study has shown that Azerbaijani and French colloquial idioms share many cognitive foundations yet diverge in lexical and cultural specifics. Both languages employ animal imagery (zoonyms) to encode traits like courage, cunning, and folly, consistent with conceptual metaphor theory, but their choice of animals and expression patterns reflect distinct cultural histories. French idioms often draw on medieval European imagery (lions, knights, domestic birds) while Azerbaijani idioms reflect Turkic folklore (wolves, foxes, camels). Structurally, French tends to use simple noun-verb constructions, whereas Azerbaijani frequently uses compound words and onomatopoeic forms.

Our analysis (see Table 1 and the Appendix) identifies about 50 idioms across both languages, detailing literal and figurative meanings. It highlights cases of full equivalence (e.g. dog-vs-cat idioms) and partial or unique expressions. The findings contribute new insights: for example, we document previously unnoted Azerbaijani idioms equivalent to well-known French ones, and vice versa. This enriches understanding of cross-linguistic idiomaticity and aids translators and educators. Future work could expand to corpora of spoken language to gauge frequency and register differences, or incorporate psycholinguistic tests on idiom comprehension across cultures.

In sum, animal-based idioms in Azerbaijani and French illustrate the interplay of universal cognitive mapping and local cultural material. They offer a window into how each language community perceives human nature through the lens of the animal world. By systematically categorizing these idioms and interpreting their cultural roots, we advance both theoretical phraseology and practical cross-cultural linguistics, supporting claims that idioms “encapsulate deeper cultural significance” beyond their lexical components.

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