

Taboo zoonyms: What do *bear*, *lynx* and *wolf* have in common?

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*Received 14.12.2023,
accepted 30.12.2023.*

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to trace the etymologies of the English words *bear*, *lynx* and *wolf* and their Polish equivalents *niedźwiedź*, *ryś* and *wilk* within the context of Indo-European languages in terms of the mechanisms for creating euphemisms to denote animals subject to the phenomenon of linguistic tabooization. The methodology comprises the following stages: selection of cognates (to determine the scope of attestation); examination of the semantic features of the selected vocabulary; and an attempt to outline the problem of the functional features of euphemisms to denote tabooed vocabulary. The results of these considerations can contribute to concretising our ideas about the linguistic constitution of the surrounding world by past language users and linguistic interrelationships, as well as help reveal the peculiarities of euphemistic vocabulary conditioned by the functioning of linguistic taboos.

Keywords

etymology, Proto-Indo-European (PIE), zoonyms, taboo, euphemisms

Zoonimy objęte tabu: Co łączy *niedźwiedzia, rysia i wilka?*

Abstrakt

Celem artykułu jest prześledzenie etymologii angielskich słów *bear*, *lynx* i *wolf* oraz ich polskich ekwiwalentów *niedźwiedź*, *ryś* i *wilk* w kontekście języków indoeuropejskich pod kątem mechanizmów tworzenia eufemizmów na określenie zwierząt objętych zjawiskiem tabuizacji / eufemizacji językowej. Metodologia obejmuje: zebranie wyrazów pokrewnych (dla określenia zakresu poświadczenia); zbadanie cech semantycznych wybranego słownictwa; oraz próbę nakreślenia problemu cech funkcjonalnych eufemizmów na oznaczenie słownictwa tabuizowanego. Wyniki tych rozważań mogą przyczynić się do konkretyzacji naszych wyobrażeń na temat językowego konstytuowania otaczającego świata przez dawnych użytkowników języka oraz wzajemnych powiązań językowych, a także pozwalają ukazać specyfikę słownictwa eufemistycznego uwarunkowanego funkcjonowaniem tabu językowego.

Słowa kluczowe

etymologia, praindoeuropejski, zoonimy, tabu, eufemizmy

1. Introduction

The article focuses on the etymologies of vocabulary items denoting selected primal forest predators, known in the European culture since ancient times – English *bear*, *lynx*, *wolf*, and their Polish equivalents *niedźwiedź*, *ryś* and *wilk*. Over the centuries, the original zoonyms were replaced by new names with different semantic features, superseding their ancient predecessors. The goal is to examine what kind of terms supplanted these lexical items and try to answer the question of why this might have happened, or, as the title suggests, what these animals have in common. Section 2 focuses on presenting the problem of lin-

guistic tabooization and euphemization. Section 3 focuses on the methodology of this research. Section 4 (divided into three subsections) presents the linguistic evidence and briefly investigates the scope of attestation of selected items of vocabulary with their cognates. In Section 5, the semantic features of selected items of vocabulary are examined, and an attempt is made to outline the problem of functional features of euphemisms denoting tabooed vocabulary for these specific examples. Section 6 presents the results of these considerations, which may contribute to concretising the ideas about the linguistic constitution of the surrounding world by past language users and linguistic interrelationships, as well as revealing the specificity of euphemistic vocabulary conditioned by the functioning of linguistic taboos.

2. Linguistic tabooization and euphemization

Language reflects social values of its users (Smith 2010; Kennedy et al. 2021). Taboos have long occupied a peripheral place in linguistic research due to their inherent linguistic complexity (Pedraza 2018). Recently, however, there has been increasing interest in revisiting this issue, especially from a cognitive and sociolinguistic perspective. Still, little space has been devoted to it in historical linguistics.

Language taboos contain a strong cultural component that represents specific customs and perspectives of language users on their society (Fromkin et al. 2014). They occur when language users avoid talking about certain phenomena (Crystal 1995); some issues are not mentioned at all for fear of bad fate or summoning evil; or, omitted elements are replaced with other words, circumlocutions or euphemisms (Monaghan et al. 2012). Fromkin and Rodman (1993) posit that a euphemism is a word or phrase that replaces a taboo word or helps avoid an unpleasant topic. Hughes (2006: 463) describes the relationship between taboo and euphemism as “symbiotic”. In this symbiosis, the negative power of the taboo and the social risk associated with it interact with the desirability of euphemism as a way to

avoid this risk. Hughes (2006: 151) defines euphemism as “deliberately indirect, conventionally imprecise, or socially ‘comfortable’ ways of referring to taboo, embarrassing, or unpleasant topics”.

The same type of symbiotic and compensatory relationship is considered by Jing-Schmidt (2007) as key to explaining the negative bias in human cognition and the Pollyanna effect, i.e. the preference for positive qualifiers in language use, observed in Boucher and Osgood (1969). Jing-Schmidt maintains that awareness of verbal risk itself shapes language users’ verbal choices, and the Pollyanna effect is not so much inspired by optimism as motivated by the need to manage such risk.

Euphemisms can be classified according to the semantic fields to which they refer. Rawson (1981: 1) proposes his own classification of euphemisms into positive and negative. Positives inflate and magnify, making euphemized elements seem greater and more important than they really are. Negative euphemisms weaken and deflate; they are defensive in nature, balancing the power of taboo terms and otherwise removing from the language anything that people prefer not to come into direct contact with.

Taboo, in its broadest generalization, refers to things, people, actions and behaviours that should not be touched, performed, interacted with, talked about or undertaken, so that they do not cause harm to the perpetrator or to society as a whole (Allan and Burridge 2006: 3–4). That includes prohibitions against naming dangerous animals (Burridge 2006b). Taboos regarding animal names are common and reflect the animistic past of human societies (Jing-Schmidt 2019). Frazer (1911: 190) refers to “savage” hunters and fishermen who concealed the names of animals they intended to kill. This coincides with the taboo on animal names in various societies (Emeneau 1948; Patyal 1980; Smal-Stocki 1950). While Frazer sees the repression of animal names as a “hunters’ taboo”, Emeneau points to religious and mythical motivations as part of ancient animism combined with word magic, of which abundant evidence exists in various lan-

guages (Ogden and Richards 1927; Izutsu 1956; Tornaghi 2010).

The sense of fear probably played a key role in coining the words for these rather terrifying animals. Perhaps that is why the etymologies of words for selected predators of the primeval forest, known in the European culture since ancient times – English *bear*, *lynx*, *wolf* and Polish *niedźwiedź*, *ryś* and *wilk* – are so intriguing, particularly when taking into account the specific tabooization and euphemization of their original meanings.

3. Methodology of research

The research methodology was inspired by the research on cognates, specifically Rychło (2019), as illustrated in several case studies (Rychło 2012, 2013, 2014b, 2017, 2018, 2021; Rychło and Witczak 2021). This methodology is mainly based on comparative analysis and includes an assessment of the time (stage 1) and scope (stage 2) of attestation, as well as a morphological (stage 3) and phonological (stage 4) analysis. In works on cognates, it is conventional to compare groups of words in depth; therefore, due to the range of linguistic material covered here, the full scope of this approach has been somewhat limited. Consequently, the methodology used in the present work primarily considers the semantic links between the words under study (Rychło 2016).

This article traces six vocabulary items denoting selected primal forest predators (English *bear*, *lynx*, *wolf*, and Polish *niedźwiedź*, *ryś* and *wilk*), in terms of semantics and etymology. The intention is not to analyse them exhaustively or to rewrite dictionaries. Previous research was reviewed, i.e. Abaev, Beekes, Derksen, Kroonen, Linde, Mallory and Evans, Matasović, Piwowarczyk, Smoczyński, de Vaan (including earlier work, such as Pokorny, Shevelov, Urbańczyk).

The methodology of cognitive linguistics is used, as a contemporary school of linguistic practice and thinking, dealing with the study of significant correlations between human language, mind and socio-physical knowledge (Evans et al. 2007: 2–36),

a field related to sociolinguistics, examining semantics and the study of metaphors and metonymy, and in the case of analysed material – euphemisms and taboos.

4. Linguistic evidence

4.1. English *bear* and Polish *niedźwiedź*

According to Piwowarczyk (2022: 58), the most primordial word root for ‘bear’, reconstructed from Proto-Indo-European (PIE), is **h₂rtkō-*, and can be found in eight groups of Indo-European languages: Anatolian, Indian, Iranian, Greek, Armenian, Italian, Celtic, Albanian. To give a few examples, Hittite *ḫartaggaš* ‘bear’, Sanskrit *ṛkṣaḥ* ‘bear’, Avest. *aršo* ‘bear’, Greek *ἄρκτος* (*árktos*) ‘bear’, Latin *ursus* ‘bear’, Old Armenian *արջ* (*arj*) ‘bear’, and Albanian *ari* ‘bear’, all retain the PIE root evident today in the word *Arctic* (the land of bears). Remnants of this PIE root can be seen in Old Irish *art*, Welsh *art*, Breton *arzh*, (‘bear’, ‘hero’, ‘warrior’) which resounds in the English name *Arthur*.

Noticeably, this PIE root is not attested in the Balto-Slavic or Germanic groups. The English word ‘bear’ descends from the Proto-Germanic [PGmc] root **berō* ‘bear’ (cf. Old English [OE] *bera* ‘bear’, Old High German [OHG] *bero* ‘bear’, Middle High German [MHG] *ber* ‘bear’, German *Bär* ‘bear’). The Germanic base is of uncertain and disputed origin, but is usually said to reflect the PIE root **b^her-* ‘brown’; (cf. Ringe 2017: 106), thus originally meaning literally ‘the brown one’. As far as the Polish word *niedźwiedź* is concerned, it descends from the Proto-Slavic [PSl] **medvĕdъ* (descendant of the Proto-Balto-Slavic [PBSl] **medwĕ^ʔdis*), a historical compound of **medъ* ‘honey’ + **(j)ĕsti* ‘to eat’, hence literally the epithet ‘honey-eater’. Cognates include, among others, Old Church Slavonic [OCS] *медвѣдъ* (*medvĕdъ*), Old Polish *miedźwiedź*, and even Sanskrit *madhvād* ‘honey-eater’ (cf. Borys 2005: 360; Derksen 2008: 306; Olander 2001: PR 132).

Since there are primary (unmotivated) words in the ancient Indo-European languages that occur in many related lan-

guages, while they are absent in the Balto-Slavic and Germanic groups, there is an assumption that there must have been a kind of displacement or replacement by descriptive compounds. Slavic languages certainly had a form inherited from **h₂rtk̑os* but at some point, before it reached the written form, language users must have decided that the word was better left unsaid. Which may mean that other names were used to describe this type of animal in these language groups, giving rise to the assumption of a likely taboo distortion (cf. Derksen 2008: 306; Mallory and Adams 1997: 55; de Vaan 2008: 645).

It may have been the case that the “original” PIE word **h₂rtk̑os* ‘bear’ was also a euphemism, since it contains guttural sounds, a possible onomatopoeic substitute (meaning ‘the roaring one’), because of a belief that saying the name might summon the animal.

4.2. *Lynx* and *ryś*

The name originated in Middle English [ME] (*lynx*, *linx*, *lenx*, *lynce*) via Latin *lynx* ‘lynx’, from Greek word *λύγξ* (*lúnx*) ‘lynx’, derived from the Indo-European root **leuk-* denoting ‘light’, ‘brightness’, in reference to the luminescence of this animal’s gleaming eyes or its ability to see in the dark (Beekes 2010: 875; Mallory and Adams 1997: 359).

Cognates include, e.g. Lithuanian *lūšis* ‘lynx’, OHG *luhs* ‘lynx’, German *luchs* ‘lynx’, OE *lox* ‘lynx’, Russian *рысь* (*rys*) ‘lynx’. In the Slavic group, inherited from Proto-Slavic **ȓysь*, from **l̑ysь*, where the initial *l-* was replaced by *r-*, probably under the influence of another word, **rysь* ‘reddish’ (Beekes 2010: 875), perhaps due to hunters’ taboo, cf. Polish *rysawy*, *rudawy*, *rdzawy*, *ryży* (Boryś 2005: 530).

The ME word *lynx/linx* was the Latin borrowing that replaced earlier OE cognate word *lox* (<PGmc **luhsaz*), attested for example in Ælfred’s *Beothius: Aristoteles sǣde ðæt deór wǣere ðæt mihte ǣlc wuht þurhseón ge treówa ge furþum stánas; ðæt deór wé hátaþ lox* (Bosworth 1882: 647).

4.3. *Wolf and wilk*

The semantic unit ‘wolf’ is represented in several lexemes in Indo-European. Inherited from Balto-Slavic [BSI] **wilkós*, from PIE **ulkw-o-s* (Derksen 2008: 536; de Vaan 2008: 688), with cognates that include PSI **v̅lkw̅* (*vũlkũ*) ‘wolf’, Polish *wilk* ‘wolf’, Russian *волк* (*volk*) ‘wolf’, OCS *v̅lkw̅* (*vliku*) ‘wolf’, Czech *vlk* ‘wolf’, Greek *λύκος* (*lýkos*) ‘wolf’; with OHG *wolf* ‘wolf’, OE *wulf* ‘*wolf*’, originating from PGmc **wulfaz*. The sound variation in the English *wolf* and Polish *wilk* is explained by Rychło (2014a).

Given the earlier derivation being Latin *lupus* ‘wolf’, de Vaan (2008: 353) suggests that a semantic shift from *volpes* ‘fox’ to *lupus* ‘wolf’ may have been due to a tabooistic replacement of an earlier unattested word for ‘wolf’. As far as the original meaning is concerned, there are several hypotheses, two most notable ones denoting ‘the dangerous one’ or ‘the one who tears, lacerates’ (Mallory and Adams 1997: 645).

5. Semantic and functional features

It is evident that original terms for ‘bear’, ‘lynx’ and ‘wolf’ were customarily replaced by euphemisms, which most probably arose through taboo avoidance (reflecting the danger posed by the animal) or tabooistic replacement or displacement. It was most probably due to these animals being associated with evil or bad fate, for fear of summoning them (Crystal 1995). The circumlocutions or euphemisms were created (Monaghan et al. 2012) to avoid the unpleasant topic (Fromkin and Rodman 1993). Euphemisms, deliberately indirect and conventionally imprecise, helped early societies avoid these threats (Hughes 2006: 151). Thus, ‘bear’ was named ‘the brown one’; the word for ‘lynx’ can be etymologized as ‘the one with bright eyes’; and the structural meaning of ‘wolf’ can be described as ‘the dangerous one’ or ‘the one who tears, lacerates’. It can be assumed that there was a compensatory relationship explaining the negative attitude, motivated by the need to manage the risks associated with these dangerous creatures (Jing-Schmidt 2007). According

to Rawson's (1981) classification, it can be assumed that all these euphemisms were negative and defensive in nature, and their purpose was to weaken and reduce the risk posed by these animals. Tabooization can be explained by the animistic past of human societies and hunters' taboo (Frazer 1911: 190), which can also be linked to religious and mythical motivations within ancient animism combined with word magic (Emeneau 1948). The fact that in Indo-European languages there are several words for 'bear', 'lynx' and 'wolf' proves that these animals were widespread throughout the Indo-European territory and had cult and ritual significance, which is confirmed by the oldest Indo-European traditions.

The words in question are believed to have been ritually replaced in the Balto-Slavic and Germanic branches of the Indo-European languages because of the hunters' taboo on the names of wild animals; *cf.* other descriptive names for 'bear': Irish *mathúin* 'the good calf', Welsh *mochyn mel* 'the honey-pig', Lithuanian *lokỹs* 'the licker', Russian *медведь* (*medvéd'*) 'the honey-eater'. In this way, they were euphemistically replaced due to the taboo and its cultic meaning. In both Slavic and Germanic language groups, the original words were replaced by descriptive terms based on the characteristic features of the animals. The reason for this replacement, which mainly took place in the Balto-Slavic-Germanic area, may have been the greater cult importance of these animals in this region, compared to the areas occupied by people speaking the languages of other Indo-European groups.

The sense of fear also could have played a key role in coining the words for these rather terrifying animals. Early Indo-Europeans generally tabooed the region's most important predator, bears in northern Europe and wolves further south.

6. Conclusions

It has been suggested that Germanic and Balto-Slavic populations may have shared an Indo-European background with strong non-Indo-European influences (Kortlandt 2016). This is

confirmed by folk tales shared between East Baltic peoples on both sides of the Baltic Sea, as well as between East European cultures, indicating a very strong interaction between Germanic and Balto-Slavic populations (Bortolini et al. 2017). Cultural traits and similarities may have been acquired as a result of intensive contact between Germanic peoples from Scandinavia and Proto-Slavic peoples from Central and Eastern Europe across the North European Plain and the Baltic Sea. The reconstructed lexis confirms evidence of contact between Germanic and Baltic languages in the same regions, and the tendency to call predators euphemistically also represents some common cultural features, reflecting a similar mentality and cognitive strategies.

The fact that certain language groups treated the vocabulary associated with forest predators in a euphemistic manner is certainly no coincidence. The specificity of the euphemistic vocabulary conditioned by the functioning of a linguistic taboo on dangerous forest-dwellers such as the 'bear', 'lynx' and 'wolf' certainly confirms the hunters' taboo, but it also provides an insight into the interlingual connections and approaches to the linguistic constitution of the surrounding world by past language speakers.

An interesting observation may be that the descriptive compound for 'bear' can be found as early as Sanskrit: *madhvád* 'honey-eater'. Thus, euphemistic circumlocutions already existed in the ancient language, which may suggest that this is not entirely a solution of Germanic and Balto-Slavic language groups alone. However, there has certainly been a loss and/or elimination of the original term inherited from PIE **h₂rtkos* in these two groups.

The present study is confined only to a selection of vocabulary items and a non-exhaustive analysis, which is its limitation. More in-depth research is needed to examine other taboo words in order to draw more structured conclusions. Consequently, this creates great potential for further research in this area.

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