

## AS HUNGRY AS A WOLF, AS SILENT AS A LAMB: CORPUS ANALYSIS OF ADJECTIVAL SIMILES WITH AN ANIMAL COMPONENT

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**Abstract:** This study focuses on analysis of the Slovak adjectival similes with an animal noun component. Its aim is not only to verify the incidence of individual similes, but also to investigate the qualitative aspects of phrases that follow the structure: adjective + *ako/stá* (like/as) + noun, e.g. *otravný ako komár* ‘as annoying as a mosquito’ and *pomalý ako rak* ‘as slow as a crayfish’. The analysis is based on data from the Slovak National Corpus and is aimed at describing the semantic properties of the selected phrases.

**Keywords:** adjectives, corpus, simile, animal component

### 1 INTRODUCTION

The primary function of an adjective is to enrich the lexical meaning of the noun with which it forms a collocation. This relationship is two-way, i.e. the nouns also influence the lexical meaning of the adjectives and they are involved in defining it. In their semantic structure, the specification and identification semes are only formed in connection with a particular noun (cf. e.g. Horák 1956; Pauliny 1981).

This study assumes that specific adjectives tend to be associated with only a limited set of animals in Slovak similes, reflecting culturally salient or perceptually prominent traits. It aims to explore which adjectives are linked to which animals, and how consistently these associations appear in actual usage. The analysis draws on corpus data to map these patterns. To answer this, the analysis proceeds in two directions: first, by examining which animals are associated with a given adjective in similes (e.g. *mlčanlivý ako mulica/ryba* ‘as silent as a hinny/fish’) and second, by investigating which adjectives co-occur with specific animal names (e.g. *bocian: dlhý, jednonohý, prostoduchý, vysoký* ‘stork: long, one-legged, simple-minded, tall’).

This dual approach enables us to explore both the fixity and variability of adjectival similes in Slovak, while acknowledging that the findings represent only a partial study of the broader lexical system.

Since the article is primarily focused on verifying the occurrence of characteristics attributed to animals, expressed by adjectives in specific word expressions, at this stage of the research we do not distinguish between random, the so-called textual collocations, and lexicalized expressions (including phrasemes or figurative ones).

## 2 RESEARCH DATA

There are many collocations that associate a property (of something) with a substance. Narrowing down the selection, this paper focuses on a certain semantic range of noun collocations: phrases combining adjectives and nouns that associate a property or static feature with a certain animal. As part of the synthesis phase, the presented research evaluates which adjectives are most frequently used in these collocations, as well as what properties, features, or states are attributed to specific animals. This research draws its data from the Slovak National Corpus (*prim-10.0-public-sane*; hereinafter referred to as the “SNC”). The corpus was used to search for collocations with the structure adjective + *ako/st'a* (like/as) + noun. Then, collocations where an animal name occurred in the noun position were recorded. The LexiCorp (Benko 2019) tool was used to select materials containing the *zviera* ‘animal’ lemma from the Dictionary of Contemporary Slovak (Slovník súčasného slovenského jazyka, hereinafter referred to as the “DCS”). The resulting material was then checked manually, forming a list of animals captured in the dictionaries. These were then supplemented with some animal names from a more comprehensive list of animals<sup>1</sup>. The final list included a total of 866 animal names. It contained not only general animal names, but in some cases both their male and female counterparts, e.g. *sliepka* – *kohút* ‘hen – rooster’, *mačka* – *kocúr* ‘queen – tomcat’, and for some animals it also included diminutive names, e.g. *baranček* ‘baby ram’, *prasiatko* ‘piglet’, as well as other derived forms, e.g. *mača* ‘kitten’, *prasa* ‘pig’.

The corpus search made use of CQL: [tag="["AG].\*"] [lemma\_lc="ako|st'a"] [lemma\_lc="\*zviera"], and the \*zviera (\*animal) position used animal names from the final list, e.g. *akara|akuči|albatros* (*acara|acouchi|albatross*). In the SNC, 258 lexemes were found that were functionally used in the text in the studied simile. The obtained material was studied in two forms – with a focus on the adjectival feature (different animal names associated with the same adjective, e.g. *mlčanlivý ako mulica, ryba* ‘as silent as a hinny, fish’) and with a focus on the animal name (studying which adjectives are associated with the name of a specific animal, e.g. *bocian: dlhý, jednonohý, prostoduchý, vysoký* ‘stork: long, one-legged, simple-minded, tall’). This paper is the result of a partial analysis and, given its scope, it does not aspire to be exhaustive.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.zones.sk/studentske-prace/biologia/175s-zoznam-zvierat-a-zivocichov-od-a-po-z>

### 3 SIMILE ANALYSIS

This research assumes that each adjective will only be assigned to some animals (possibly only a single one) as bearers of a specific characteristic. The aim of the research is to find out which animals are associated with specific characteristics in the eyes of language users.

#### 3.1 Analysis through adjectival features

The most prominently occurring phrase in the studied material was *hladný ako vlk* ‘as hungry as a wolf’ (503), which is commonly used in communication. Moreover, it is also listed as a fixed expression in the DCS. Other phrases with the conjunctions *ako* and *sťa* that occurred rather frequently included the similes *voľný ako/st'a vták* ‘as free as a bird’ (193), *zdravý ako ryba/rybička/rybka* ‘as healthy as a fish’ (162/123/10), *červený ako rak* ‘as red as a crayfish’ (158), *šťastný ako blcha* ‘as happy as a flea’ (156), *mokrý ako myš* ‘as wet as a mouse’ (147), *slabý ako mucha/muška* ‘as weak as a fly’ (100/5). Once again, these are fixed expressions, some of which are listed in the Short Dictionary of Slovak (Krátke slovník slovenského jazyka 2003; hereinafter referred to as the “SDS”) or the DCS as examples of phrasemes. The collocation *spotený ako myš* ‘as sweat-soaked as a mouse’ is a relatively frequent phrase (89) in which the original passive participle becomes static and acquires the meaning of the adjective *mokrý* ‘wet’. Even the SDS lists the expressive phrases *mokrý/zmoknutý/spotený ako myš* ‘as wet/rain-soaked/sweat-soaked as a mouse’, which implies their status as synonyms. This development is a consequence of the dynamics manifested in the transition of words between different parts of speech, the natural result of which is lexicalization.

Less frequent incidence was recorded for the phrases *krotký ako baránok/baran* ‘as tame as a ram/lamb’ (74/4), *čulý ako rybička/rybka* ‘as lively as a fish’ (57/1), *tvrdohlavý ako baran* ‘as stubborn as a ram’ (54), *čerstvý ako rybička* ‘as fresh as a fish’ (53), *opatrný ako had* ‘as careful as a snake’ (50). The first four collocations are commonly used in both standard and spoken Slovak, which is why associations in meaning between the adjective and the animal in question are not surprising. The simile *opatrný ako had* ‘as cautious as a snake’ is not prototypical, as evidenced by its position when phrasemes are listed in the DCS – the examples also show that caution is a less typical characteristic for snakes than deceitfulness, flexibility, insincerity or the ability to make excuses. However, the phrase *opatrní ako hady* ‘as cautious as snakes’ can be found in the Gospel of Matthew (*Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be cautious as serpents and simple as doves.* [10, 16]), from where the text is paraphrased either in full or in abridged or updated forms (of the listed occurrences in the SNC, as many as 38 are direct quotations).

Some less frequent collocations are also worth mentioning, e.g. *sklesnutý ako ovca* ‘as dejected as a sheep’ (49), *slobodný ako vták*, *čierny ako havran* ‘as free as a bird, as black as a rook’ (48); *lenivý ako voš* ‘as lazy as a louse’ (43), *jednoduchý ako holubica/holub* ‘as

simple as a dove’<sup>2</sup> (38/1), as well as those that users of the language are widely familiar with, e.g. *prefíkaný ako líška* ‘as sly as a fox’ (37), *usilovný ako včelička* ‘as industrious as a bee’ (33), *pyšný ako páv* ‘as proud as a peacock’ (27), *hladný ako pes* ‘as hungry as a dog’ (24).

Many phrases were recorded with minimal occurrences (below 10). Among these, there were often expressions that could be perceived as symptomatic and in some sense expressive, e.g. *bezmocný ako ovca* ‘as helpless as a sheep’, *múdry ako pes* ‘as smart as a dog’, *nervózny ako mačka* ‘as nervous as a cat’, *samočársky ako sob* ‘as solitary as a reindeer’, *tvrdohlavý ako byk* ‘as stubborn as a bull’, *škaredý ako opica* ‘as ugly as a monkey’, *štíhly ako laň* ‘as thin as a doe’, *žiarlivý ako pes* ‘as jealous as a dog’.

### 3.1.1 The contextual dependence of adjectival similes

In some cases, the characteristic does not apply to the animal in general, but only in a particular situation. As a result, adjectival associations with several seemingly incompatible animal names were recorded. These include, among others, the characteristics *bezbranný ako jarabička* [v hniezde] ‘as defenceless as a partridge [in the nest]’, *bezmocný ako mucha* [v pavúčom objatí] ‘as helpless as a fly [in a spider’s embrace]’; *protivný ako ryby* [ktoré neberú] ‘as annoying as fish [that don’t bite]’; *príťažlivý ako sumec* [zabalený do poťahu na matrac] ‘as attractive as a catfish [wrapped in a mattress cover]’.

A specific one is the adjective *nervózny* ‘nervous’, which requires completion because the meaning of the collocation is not definable without further context. For instance, the phrase *nervózny ako blcha* ‘as nervous as a flea’, *nervózny ako prasa* ‘as nervous as a pig’ only gains a clear meaning in a specific textual context (*nervózny ako blcha* [na horúcom tanieri] ‘as nervous as a flea [on a hot plate], *prasa* [pred zakáľačkou] ‘a pig [before the slaughter]’; similar to other animals in this collocation: *levica* [v klietke] ‘a lioness [in a cage]’. Although adjectives reflect a relatively permanent property, their semantic structure may also capture a state that only lasts for a certain time, e.g. an emotion, feeling, sensation, or facial expression. Since the adjective *nervózny* ‘nervous’ is seemingly semantically unrelated to animal names, its meaning is modified through the author’s perspective, which is manifested in creative solutions, e.g. through humorous context.

Another interesting type of simile is based on irony, e.g. *Je asi taká bezbranná ako mačka s ostrými pazúrmi*. ‘She’s about as defenceless as a cat with sharp claws’<sup>3</sup>; *Ocko*

<sup>2</sup> The phrase is the second part of the biblical quote *opatrní ako hady a jednoduchi ako holubice* ‘cautious as snakes and simple as doves’, and this meaning prevails in the SNC. In 11 instances, either the whole sentence occurs (including the part about snakes), or only the part referring to the dove in other texts. Surprisingly, an actualizing shift of this quotation to the form *jednoduchý ako holub* ‘simple as a pigeon’ was found in a text from the religious sphere (a 1996 book by Anton Hlinka titled *Ozvena slova 3. Blahozvest v horizonte ľudskej skúsenosti* ‘Echo of the word 3. Gospel on the Horizon of Human Experience’).

<sup>3</sup> Warrenová, T. A. (2013). Krásna pokušiteľka. Bratislava: Slovenský spisovateľ, 271 p. Translation: Diana Ghaniová.

*je už doma z roboty, je asi taký milý ako krokodíl, ktorého štuchajú do oka.* ‘Dad’s already home from work, he’s about as nice as a crocodile that’s being poked in the eye.’<sup>4</sup>. In these examples, a trait is being attributed to an animal that can be characterized by the opposite character trait. It is true, however, that the author appears to be aware of the contradiction within the phrase, thus the simile is preceded by the words *asi taký/-á* ‘about as’.

In addition to adjectives, the attributive function of the immediate left-hand position can also be served by participles indicating an implicitly present action. It is worth noting that the classification of the identified lexemes into the group of participles in the SNC is determined by their word-formation structure, which makes them identical to the passive participles of verbs. Although a few isolated occurrences of the above type of collocations were identified in the studied material, there were also phrases with a higher frequency, e.g. *spotený ako myš* ‘as sweat-soaked as a mouse’ (89), *uťahaný ako kôň* ‘as worn out as a horse’ (72), *unavený ako pes* ‘as tired as a dog’ (28), *zbitý ako pes* ‘as beat-up as a dog’ (19), *zmoknutý ako myš* ‘as rain-soaked as a mouse’ (7). Some features are associated with multiple animals, e.g. *opitý ako čajka, hus, prasa, sviňa, tel'a* ‘as drunk as a gull, goose, pig, swine, calf’; *uťahaný ako kôň, mača, pes, somár, tava* ‘as tired as a horse, kitten, dog, donkey, camel’; *zviazaný ako jahňa, kozľa, ovca, prasa* ‘as tied as a lamb, kid, sheep, pig’. It is also true for the above collocations that attributes with a higher frequency of occurrence can be classified as adjectives in regard to their part-of-speech status (e.g. *uťahaný* ‘worn out’, *spotený* ‘sweat-soaked’).

In order to find out whether the most used adjectives in the examined constructions are already lexical phrases, figurative or phraseological, we looked for them in dictionaries. In the SDS and the DCS, the following phrases can be found, likewise those with high frequency in our research, such as *zdravý ako ryba* ‘as healthy as a fish’, *hladný ako vlk* ‘as hungry as a wolf’, *voľný ako vták* ‘as free as a bird’, *šťastný ako blcha* ‘as happy as a flea’ (a total of 31). In addition to these adjectives our study contains a significantly larger number of similes involving also other adjectives.

### 3.2 Analysis through animal names

The analysis performed in this research examined what characteristics are attributed to which animals, i.e. which specific animals have a single characteristic attributed in the texts and, conversely, which animals have a rich inventory of characteristics attributed. The reverse approach can be evaluated both quantitatively and qualitatively.

In terms of the number of characteristics associated with animals, the largest numbers of attributes were found in phrases with the nouns *pes* ‘dog’ (84), *had* ‘snake’ (65), *mačka/mača/mačiatko* ‘cat/kitten’ (64/11/10), *kôň* ‘horse’ (59), *ryba/rybička/rybka* ‘fish’ (47/13/7), *vták* ‘bird’ (45), *baran* ‘ram’ (40), *medved* ‘bear’ (38), *muchá* ‘fly’ (36), *vlk* ‘wolf’ (32), *opica* ‘monkey’ (31), *lev* ‘lion’ (30).

<sup>4</sup> Šulajová, Z. (2012). Džínsový denník 3. Bratislava: Slovenský spisovateľ, 439 p.

The dog as the animal with the greatest number of attributes is perceived in differentiated contexts. In terms of capturing one's outward appearance, it is used as an entity of a particular colour (*biely* 'white', *hnedý* 'brown'<sup>5</sup>), then a characteristic related to physical appearance (*nízky* 'short', *starý* 'old', *škaredý* 'ugly'), a character trait (*bezohľadný* 'reckless', *citlivý* 'sensitive', *lenivý* 'lazy', *mľkvy* 'silent', *prísny* 'stern', *sprostý* 'stupid', *šťastný* 'happy'), or an indication of one's current state (*hladný* 'hungry', *smutný* 'sad'). Some adjectives associated with the lexeme *pes* 'dog' through simile have rather vague semantic contours when perceived without context (*podradný* 'inferior', *prirodzený* 'natural', *samotný* 'solitary'). As the examples indicate, dogs are also perceived on the positive-negative axis.

A similar situation arises when comparing characteristics to a cat, often perceived as a pragmatic antonym of the lexeme *pes* 'dog'. In the context of character, cats are described using both neutral and expressive adjectives (*čistotný* 'clean', *falošný* 'deceitful', *opatrny* 'careful', *ostražitý* 'cautious', *prefikaný* 'cunning', *smilný* 'lustful', *úskočný* 'crafty', *zvodený* 'seductive'). A cat's appearance is associated with a colour that is being likened (*biely* 'white', *čierny* 'black'), an external characteristic (*chudý* 'thin', *krásny* 'beautiful', *mäkký* 'soft'), or an observed state (*čistý* 'clean', *ospanlivý* 'sleepy', *pradúci* 'purring'). Here, too, there were several adjectives where comparisons to a cat may be semantically non-standard (*pružný* 'flexible, elastic', *vláčny* 'smooth'). The word for a baby cat – *mača* 'kitten' – is mostly associated with character traits (*hravý* 'playful', *lenivý* 'lazy', *malý* 'small'). A similar situation occurs in similes with the lexeme *mačiatko* 'kitten', which include adjectives with a positive meaning (*ihravý* 'playful', *krotký* 'tame', *mierumilovný* 'peaceful'), one attribute related to physical aspects (*slabý* 'weak'), and the adjective *veľký* 'big', which, in conjunction with the diminutive, creates a phrase based on irony („*Tie ostatné, čo boli pred vami, sa v škole dlho neohriali, "uškrnul sa, zatial' čo do predného skla udierali vločky veľké ako mačiatka.* ‘„The other ones before you didn't stay in school long,” he grinned as snowflakes as big as kittens hit the windshield.”<sup>6</sup>).

Despite the antonymic status of the lexemes *pes* 'dog' and *mačka* 'cat', some characteristics within comparative phrases are perceived as compatible with both animals, these include the attributes *lenivý* 'lazy', *maškrtný* 'sweet-toothed', *múdry* 'smart', *nervózny* 'nervous', *nežný* 'gentle', *prítuľný* 'cuddly', *šťastný* 'happy', *zlostný* 'irritable, angry'.

We also examined the pragmatic opposites *dog* and *cat* in the phraseological dictionary of Czech (Čermák et al. 2009) in which several comparative constructions with the lexeme *kočka* 'cat' – listed alphabetically (not by frequency) – are treated as a separate entries. These include expressions such as *falešný jako kočka* 'false as a cat', *mrštný jako kočka* 'agile as a cat' and *utahaný jako kočka* 'exhausted as a cat'.

<sup>5</sup> Given the length of the paper, only a few examples are listed here and elsewhere.

<sup>6</sup> Hospodárske noviny. (2007). Bratislava: Ecopress a.s., Vol. 16 [23/03/2007].

In opposition to the expression *utahaný* ‘exhausted’, the adjective *čilý* ‘lively’ appears in the expression *čilý jako rybička* ‘lively as a little fish’. The lexeme *pes* ‘dog’ is part of several word expressions in the dictionaries (e.g. *hubený/vyzáblý/vychrtlý, opuštěný, utahaný, vztekly jako pes* ‘as thin/gaunt/skinny, abandoned, tired, angry as a dog’), while just two of them (*hladový jako pes* ‘as hungry as a dog’, *věrný jako pes* ‘as faithful as a dog’) are identical with our data, in which considerably more similes occur. Although this is only an insight into figurative language, several characteristics also appear in our study.

When describing the features associated with the lexeme *had* ‘snake’, primarily the ones that appear symptomatic will be listed. The reason is that most adjectives denote the negative features usually evoked by this animal (*falošný* ‘deceitful’, *l'stivý* ‘guileful’, *podlý* ‘wicked’) or objectively observed characteristics (*jedovatý* ‘venomous’, *slizký* ‘slimy’, *tenký* ‘thin’). Therefore, the recorded attributes *krásny* ‘beautiful’, *múdry* ‘wise’<sup>7</sup>, and *prítluný* ‘cuddly’ may appear contradictory in connection with snakes.

A qualitative approach to the compared adjectives reflects the associative views of language users. The texts show that some animals are perceived exclusively negatively (*brav* ‘pig, barrow’ as *tučný* ‘fat’, *tažký* ‘heavy’; *aligátor* ‘alligator’ as *velký* ‘large’, *zákerný* ‘insidious’), others more positively (*bažant* ‘pheasant’ as *malý* ‘small’, *pekný* ‘beautiful’; *holúbok* ‘dove’ as *krotký* ‘tame’, *mierny* ‘mild’, *nevinný* ‘innocent’). An example of predominantly positive connotations could be seen in phrases with the lexeme *labut'* ‘swan’ (*jemný* ‘delicate’, *krásny* ‘beautiful’, *pôvabný* ‘charming’) and exclusively positive perceptions were observed with the diminutive form *včelička* ‘small bee’ (*pracovitý* ‘hard-working’, *usilovný* ‘diligent’, *šikovný* ‘skilful’); on the other hand, the lexeme *včela* ‘bee’ is can also be associated with negative features (*agresívny* ‘aggressive’, *nebezpečný* ‘dangerous’). Given the above examples, the synthesis of this research can also consider the influence of the word-formation structure of the superordinate noun on attribute selection. For expressive derived nouns, but also those with a diminutive suffix, it seems that language users tend to use an adjective denoting a characteristic with a positive connotation.

Several animal nouns were recorded in unique similes, i.e. with only one characteristic or feature assigned to the bearer (e.g. *bdelý ako ostriež* ‘as alert as a perch’, *tlstá ako kosatka* ‘as fat as a killer whale’, *slepý ako krt* ‘as blind as a mole’). In most of the cases, these are qualitative adjectives referring to an external characteristic of the animal. In exceptional cases, relational adjectives are used in the comparative structure (*capovitý ako cap* ‘as “billygoaty” as a billy goat’, *širokoplecí ako býk* ‘broad-shouldered like a bull’).

<sup>7</sup> The phrase *múdry ako had* ‘wise as a snake’ can be found in texts as an updated form of the biblical quote *opatrní ako hady* ‘cautious as snakes’, and in one of the listed occurrences a metatextual connection is indicated through the use of quotation marks. In another occurrence there is a more significant update in the second part of the original phrase: *múdry ako had a krotký ako holúbok* ‘as wise as a snake and as tame as a dove’.

## 4 CONCLUSION

The conducted research shows that the studied similes are dominated by qualitative adjectives (e.g. *bystrý* ‘clever’, *múdry* ‘smart’, *pyšný* ‘prideful’) that are usually associated with more than one animal. However, the studied phrases also included isolated collocations where an adjective was only used to describe one animal. These included not only qualitative adjectives (*hnusný ako ropucha* ‘as disgusting as a toad’, *prostý ako sova* ‘as simple as an owl’), but also relational ones (*hašterivý ako vrabec* ‘as quarrelsome as a sparrow’, *ochlpený ako potkan* ‘as hairy as a rat’). What was surprising was the absence of certain animals in the similes (e.g. *bzochá* ‘stink bug’, *svišť* ‘marmot’). From the perspective of evaluativeness, most of the similes are rather neutral (*farebný ako papagáj* ‘as colourful as a parrot’, *ryšavý ako krysa* ‘as ginger as a rat’), some can be viewed along the positive (*chrabrý ako lev* ‘as brave as a lion’, *pilný ako včelička* ‘as diligent as a bee’) – negative (*hlúpy ako hus* ‘as dumb as a goose’, *útočný ako piraňa* ‘as aggressive as a piranha’) axis, while semantically they more often reflect a character trait rather than an external feature. A significant number of similes use the adjective *veľký* ‘large’ (including its comparative forms), which has a wide application (in the SNC: *veľký ako osa*, *vrabec* ‘as big as a wasp, sparrow’, but also *veľký ako aligátor*, *medved’* ‘as big as an alligator, bear’). In these cases, the choice of animal is up to the language user, who can also make use of irony.

The semantic divergence of the adjective appears to be useful for the user, as depending on the subjective perception of the speaker one expression can be used for comparisons with differentiated entities, e.g. *bezočivý ako kocúr*, *opica*, *ploštica*, *voš* ‘as impudent as a cat, monkey, bedbug, louse’. However, one animal can also be associated with several, sometimes contrasting characteristics (*baran*: *hlúpy*, *krotký*, *tvrdohlavý*, *poslušný* ‘ram: stupid, tame, stubborn, obedient’).

The analysis offers suggestions for further investigation of the semantic, syntactic, as well as the word-formation and onomasiological relations of adjectival similes with an animal component. Further plans include observing the semantics of adjectives in comparative constructions containing the names of young animals, as well as constructions with augmentative animal names, investigating transformational nominalization with the consequence of using an identical adjective in both an animal simile and a nominal syntagm in the position of a congruent attribute, as well as analysing the emotions associated with animals.

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