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A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF EQUINE IDIOMS IN ENGLISH, SPANISH AND LITHUANIAN

Based on the assumption that language reflects the cultural constructs of its users, the article examines idioms containing equine component, i.e. those referring to horse and to donkey, in English, Spanish and Lithuanian. The data are collected from major phraseological dictionaries and are examined applying componential analysis, initially identifying basic meaning components characteristic of horse/donkey, dividing all idioms according to the positive or negative connotation contributed, and then establishing the idiom-distinctive meaning component. The analysis of idioms reveals that, apart from common areas of perceiving animals as a means of transportation, several language-specific traits can be identified, e.g. horse as used for racing specifically in British culture, or predominantly positive attitude to donkey (vs horse) in Spanish. The negative connotation is characteristic of all donkey idioms in Lithuanian. The results demonstrate that the negative connotation across the three languages is conveyed when the animal is attributed personifying features referring to human behaviour.

KEY WORDS: phraseology, idioms, equine, componential analysis, English, Spanish, Lithuanian.

Introduction

Language has always been the basic mean of communication and has reached the level of a complex communicative system to the effect that it reflects culture (Wierzbicka 1992). After its emergence in the early 20th century, phraseology long remained in the periphery of linguistic studies until a number of researchers in Eastern and Western Europe as well as the United States became interested in exploring the ways phraseology influences such fields as lexicology, semantics or language acquisition (Guirillo 1997). Nowadays the field is argued to have a considerable influence: it is seen as "the totality of fixed multi-word units of a language" (Piirainen 2008, p. 208).

The present study applies componential analysis to examine a particular class of phraseological units in English, Spanish, and Lithuanian – zoonyms containing reference to the following equine class domestic animals: *horse* (Sp *caballo*, Lith *arklys/žirgas*); *mare* (Sp *yegua*, Lith *kumelė*); *foal* (Sp *potro*, Lt *kumeliukas/kumelys*); *donkey/ass* (Sp *asno*, Lt *asilas*); *mule* (Sp *mula*, Lt *mulas*).

Theoretical overview

The idiom encompasses all the principal qualities of a phraseologism, such as fixedness, figurative meaning and compositeness, and consequently stands as a prototypical example of a phraseological unit (Gläser 1998; Moon 2008; Iliná 2000; Tarasevich 1991). A prototypical idiom is argued to be construed "on two different conceptual levels": the primary one, interpreting its literal meaning and the second, interpreting the figurative meaning (Dobrovoľskij & Piirainen 2007, p. 74). While idioms prominently reflect the relations between the image portrayed by the language unit and a cultural concept (Cowie 1998), cross-linguistic research on zoonyms, i.e. idioms containing reference to animals, whose domestication made them an integral part of human life, is still not that extensive (Krikmann 2001).

Idioms are considered to be closely related to the conceptual metaphor theory and cognitive linguistics to the effect that idioms are sometimes regarded as dead metaphors (Searle 1979; Sadock 1979; cf. Gibbs 1993). Therefore, idioms are figurative expressions that emerge from or are based on metaphors; consequently they reveal how our conceptual system functions and how we perceive the world. Because of these characteristics idioms serve as certain 'cultural symbols' (Cowie 1998, p. 59) and can be highly significant in cultural studies (Garcon &Nosrati 2013; Lubienė 2012; Marcinkevičienė 2001).

A recurrent class of such cultural symbols are zoonyms. Reflecting language-specific categorisation, zoonyms can be seen as labels that speakers of each language have prescribed to individual animals or their groups (Dalmau Borràs 2004).

The object of this research is the idioms containing zoonyms of equine class animals (En: *horse, mare, foal, donkey, ass, mule*; Sp: *caballo, yegua, potro, burro/ asno, mula*; Lt: *arklys, žirgas, kumelė, kumeliukas/kumelys, asilas*) in English, Spanish and Lithuanian. The stages of analysis comprised meaning extraction and comparison of the images of animals by means of componential analysis, which will be discussed below.

Methodology

The method selected for the present study is componential analysis (CA), also known as 'lexical decomposition'. The method was first introduced in the first half of the 20th century and is primarily applied to compare words belonging to the same semantic field by identifying the components of meaning and determining their differences and similarities. The fundamental idea of CA is that the overall meaning of a word consists of smaller meaning constituents. Those minimal meaning constituents ("semantic components, markers, features or semes") can be used to generalize any similarities or differences of the language units that are being compared (Goddard 2009, p. 58). CA focuses on particular aspects of meaning which are deemed necessary for the comparison. The minimal meaning components extracted can then serve as "formal criteria by which we differentiate one thing from another" (Goodenough 1956, p. 208). Many scholars believe that people do not construe idioms literally, but rather conduct CA that helps to prescribe a figurative meaning to the constituent parts of the idiom. Therefore, CA is a valuable method for a

research of idioms as, by contrasting the basic meaning components, it reveals the specific qualities or opinions idioms are based on.

The examples of idioms were collected using the following dictionaries of phraseologisms, fixed phrases, idioms and general dictionaries of each language: *PONS English and American Idioms Dictionary; Chambers Idioms; Dictionary of English Idioms; Longman Dictionary of English Idioms; Dictionary of English Colloquial Idioms; Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English; Anglų-lietuvių kalbų kasdienių frazeologizmų žodynas; Frazeologijos žodynas, Lietuviu kalbos frazeologijos žodynas, Sisteminis lietuviu kalbos frazeologijos žodynas, Frazeologijos žodynas, Diccionario fraseológico del español moderno, Diccionario de uso del español actual, Gran diccionario de la lengua española, Diccionario de uso del español, Diccionario Carroggio de la lengua Española, Diccionario de la lengua española.* As regards data collection, the method of entire selection was applied. The definitions of the idioms used in the study were formulated adjusting dictionary definitions as necessary for concision purposes. The total number of 190 idioms has been collected: 55 in English, 54 in Spanish, and 81 in Lithuanian. In the course of analysis, the number was reduced to 161: idioms rejected either did not denote any significant features of an animal and were used only as informal expressions for cursing or expressing negativity and anger, or were too metaphorical and old to ascertain their origin and identify the quality of the animal on which the idiom was based. The remaining idioms of English (52), Spanish (45) and Lithuanian (64) formed the core of the analysis.

As regards the limitations of the study, the relative frequencies of usage and consequently prevalence of the selected group of zoonyms in everyday language could not be established on the basis of corpus data. For example, from the 55 English idioms, only 5 idioms have been attested in the British National Corpus with a total of 41 occurrences (viz., *to drive a coach and horses through* (3), *Strong as a horse* (5), *Like a horse and carriage* (3), *Horse sense* (8), d*onkey work* (22)). None of the Lithuanian idioms with negative connotation were attested in the Corpus of the Contemporary Lithuanian Language. The low frequency is suggestive of idioms being part of highly stigmatised language stratum which, due to the technological advancements in the world, is not necessarily directly manifest in contemporary language. Should the relative frequencies of idioms be of interest, a different approach has to be employed, which, however, goes beyond the scope of the present study.

Further analysis was conducted at several stages. First, idioms were divided into two groups according to the type of the animal they refer to: idioms containing zoonyms *horse, mare* and *foal* (Sp *Caballo, yegua, potro*; Lt *Arklys, žirgas, kumeliukas, kumelys*) were considered as referring to the horse, while idioms containing zoonyms *donkey, ass* and *mule* (Sp *asno, mula*; Lt *asilas, mulas*) to the donkey. Secondly, idioms were divided into two groups according to whether they contributed positive or negative connotation.

CA was used to distinguish the qualities that are actually ascribed to zoonyms. The prototypical set of basic minimal components of meaning is as follows: [+animate, +four-legged, +equine, ±adult, ±female] and [+smaller than a horse] specifically for the donkey. A sample description is provided below:

foal (Sp potro; Lt kumeliukas, kumelys)
[+animate, + four-legged, +equine, -adult, ±female]

Lithuanian zoonyms '*arklys*' and '*žirgas*' were considered as having the same basic meaning because the differences have to do with animal appearance, the words used interchangeably in folklore. The same is true of the zoonym '*mule*' (Sp *mula*; Lt *mulas*): it was considered to have the same meaning components as '*donkey*', and slight differences are not relevant in linguistic analysis.

The description of idioms consisted of three parts: the idiom itself, its definition, and a description of the relevant equine component using the minimal components of meaning with those contributing a particular, non-compositional meaning, given in bold. A sample representation is provided below:

a) All the King's horses and all the King's men couldn't do something

Definition: no group however powerful was able to do something

Description: [+animate, +four-legged, +equine, +adult, ±female**, + strong, +employed in military**]

Due to space constraints, only the features contributing idiosyncratic meaning will be provided in the discussion below.

Findings and discussion

As regards the general positive or negative associations, the difference is slight in both English and Spanish, but stands out in Lithuanian (Fig.1), which is suggestive of a tendency to negativity and criticism in Lithuanian culture.

Another noticeable difference in the collected examples is the frequency of reference to horse and to donkey. Only 10 out of 55 English idioms refer to the donkey group (including *donkey* and *mule*); 23 out of 54 in Spanish, and 4 out of 81 in Lithuanian. These numbers suggest that in all three cultures, the horse is of highest importance and is most common among all equine domestic animals.
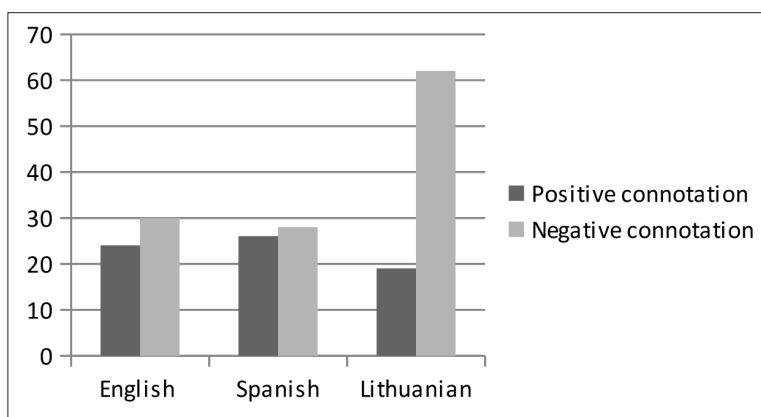

Figure 1. **Number of idioms with positive and negative connotation in each language**
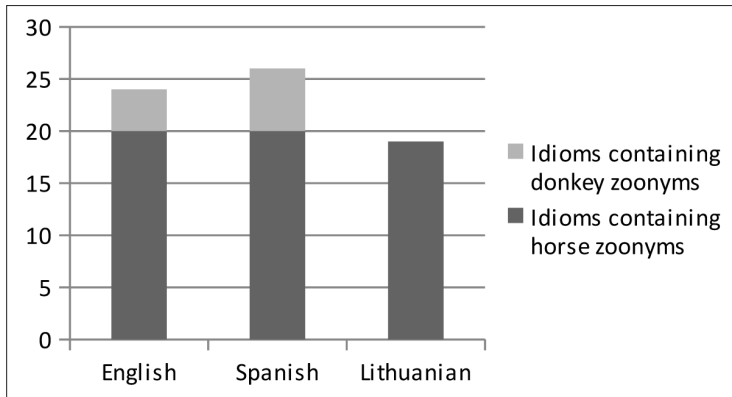
Figure 2. **Number of idioms with positive connotation in each language**

The number of positive zoonymic expressions that describe horse is significantly higher in both English and Spanish languages; in Lithuanian there are no examples of positive idioms referring to the donkey class. Therefore, a conclusion can be made that in Lithuanian culture donkey is mostly associated with negative features and is, in general, a rather uncommon animal.

Horse: positive representation

The most recurrent features of horse idioms across the three languages are [+convenient for harnessing], [+transportation], [used for riding], and [+large], with the image of a horse in harness strongly fixed in the minds of English speakers: : En *Like a horse and carriage* 'go together very well', *To drive a coach and horses through (a law, rule, regulation)* 'to find a very big loophole in it'; Sp *Ser uno de caballo* 'to be a good rider', Lt *Bloga kumelė nepavežtų* 'said about a skilful person'. Interestingly, the feature 'convenient for harnessing' was not found in Spanish idioms, which implies that the Spaniards do not tend to use horses for pulling carriages or heavy loads, or that this practice is not very common.

Two other important features identified – [+strong] and [+employed in military] – intertwine with the convenience of using horses for transportation, e.g. En *Strong as a horse* 'very strong', *All the King's horses and all the King's men couldn't do something* 'no group however powerful was able to do something', Lt *Arklio uodega nenutrūks* 'said to express that more people can fit to a carriage', Sp *Caballo de batalla* 'the most discussed question in a controversy, central issue'.

The fact that the feature 'employed in military' is not overtly manifest in Lithuanian hardly suggests that Lithuanians did not use horses in war. The reason behind this might be that horse is more likely to be seen as a farm animal because of the agrarian culture and its extensive employment in the military might became less relevant in more recent times of the country.

Notably, horse idioms in all the three languages are predominantly based on literal meaning components: they are associated with the qualities that the horse is known to

have, or supposed to have, for instance: strong (Lt *Stiprus kaip arklys*), fast (Sp *A uña de caballo)*, large (En *I could eat a horse)*, agile (Lt Kaip kumelys), as well as combinations, e.g. strong and vigorous (En *Have a/the constitution like/of a horse*).

There are also a few instances of more figurative, metaphorical associations, where the horse has personified qualities and can be seen as a symbol, e.g. trustworthy, as in En *From the horse's mouth,* or sensible, as in En *Horse sense*. The horse then is associated not only with its abilities to serve as a means of transportation, but also with its qualities as a companion to its owner. Spanish and Lithuanian idioms lack personifying figurative associations.

Finally, there are a few culture-specific features. In English, it is the 'used for racing': *A one horse race*, *The horses be off*. Consequently in British culture, the horse is closely associated with popular cultural activities that are often attended by people belonging to the upper class; consequently, the image of the animal acquires more positive features.

The quality specific to Spanish idioms is 'used for bullfighting': *Sacar bien/ limpio el caballo* 'to avoid any damage in a difficult situation, dispute'. Bullfighting is a popular spectacle in Spain and horses are an integral part of this event. Due to high probability of injury by the bull, the horse being clean or in good condition after the fight indicates success and also reveals the part of the horse's image in Spain as an important part of this popular spectacle.

Several features have only been found in Lithuanian: a)'pied coat is rare' (*kaip margas arklys*), b) 'held in paddock' (*ant keršo (margo) arklio joja; arklys/kumelė avižose*) and c) 'used for hard works' (*keršais žirgais jodinėja; už juodą arklį; dirba kaip arklys*). In most Lithuanian idioms, pied coat is associated with something doubtful or catching attention, while the other two features reflect the agrarian culture that was prevalent in the country. As the donkey is not common in Lithuanian culture, the horse was employed ubiquitously and was associated with manual work. Because of their engagement in the tasks concerning agriculture, horses were mostly held in paddock rather than stables. Therefore, the image of the horse is strongly associated with rural areas, hard work and sometimes even exploitation of the animal.

Horse: negative representation

As regards the negative aspects of the image of the horse in the three languages, only 24 out of 129 idioms reflect a somewhat negative quality of the animal: 18 in Lithuanian, 6 in English and only 2 in Spanish. Even though Lithuanian has an overall higher number of idioms with equine zoonyms, the reason why the majority of the expressions reflecting negative features of a horse are from the Lithuanian might also be due to the general disposition of people and tendency to negativity as mentioned before.

The only negative feature of the horse identified in idioms of all three languages is frightfulness: Lt *Arkliai/kumelės baidosi* to refer to an unattractive person; En *To frighten the horses* 'to be indiscreet, to shock public opinion'; Sp *Como caballo desbocado* 'hastily'.

This quality of the animal interrelates to the nature of the species being a herbivorous animal, the best way for the horse to elude predators was to run; therefore, being frightened is inscribed in the genes of equine animals, especially horses, and does not depend on the breed or living conditions, for example, country. In idiomatic expressions frightfulness may be used either in its direct sense, as Sp *como caballo desbocado* *'as a frightened horse',* or it can also be employed to convey someone's inappropriate behaviour or even unpleasant looks, as in Lt *arkliai/kumelės baidosi* and En *to frighten the horses.*

Another negative feature found in Lithuanian and English idioms is [+loud]: e.g. *Juokiasi kaip arklys, A horse laugh/ laugh like a horse,* both used to criticise someone referring to their loud and harsh laugh. It is clear that the idioms do not literally refer to the laugh of a horse: most likely this type of expressions were based on the neigh of the animal that is usually resounding and strident and might sound similar to a person laughing. This type of quality was not found in the analysis of Spanish idioms; therefore, it may be assumed that the sounds made by the horse do not seem harsh enough in Spanish culture to be an example of loud laugh or other type of noise, or that another type of animal or sound became the base for this type of idioms first in the Spanish language.

Due to space constraints, the discussion of minor differences in idioms will not be presented here.

Donkey: positive representation

The donkey often tends to be associated with negative qualities and most likely has a more negative image than a horse. The zoonyms belonging to the donkey group (*ass/mule*) are also significantly less common than those of horse across the three languages: out of 161 idioms, only 34 contained zoonyms of donkey class. 20 idioms were found which were based on the positive qualities of the donkey as well as the mule: 6 in English and 14 in Spanish (Lithuanian does not have any idioms of this kind and hence is not included in the analysis). As the features of the animal hardly repeat throughout the languages and the occurrences of them are not that frequent, the idioms reflecting the most important and descriptive qualities are discussed below.

In English donkey idioms, the features identified are fairly neutral and refer to the appearance of the animal or physical qualities rather than actually reflecting the traits of its character: [+long ears], as in *Donkey's ages/years* 'a very long time', [+herbivorous], as in *Donkey's breakfast* 'sth made of straw', [+unnatural posture], as in *Talk/argue the hind leg off a donkey* 'talk a great deal and a long time'.

Spanish idioms also focus on the descriptive features in donkey's characterization: on the colour and texture of the coat or on the fact that the animal has no horns and hence is harmless, e.g. [+grey, frizzy coat] as in *Panza de burro* [overcast sky], [-horns, -gore] as in *No morir de cornada de burro* 'to avoid any kind of danger even if small or imaginary'.

The feature common to both English and Spanish is that the donkey can be used for doing difficult and hard tasks, hence [+hard work]: En *Donkey work* ' hard, unrewarding part of any task', Sp *Burro de carga* 'said of smn who works too much', *Trabajar como un*

burro 'work very hard'. While these idioms portray the animal as having endurance and being helpful in any tasks that require strength, it is also possible to interpret the idioms as revealing that donkey is actually exploited: as the definitions demonstrate, the concept of En *donkey work* or *working as a donkey* is used to define a strenuous and gruelling work or a person that is given a too big load.

The most frequent quality ascribed to the donkey in Spanish that does not appear in the analysis of the English idioms is that the animal is used for transportation and riding, hence [+used for riding]: *Burro con dos albardas* applied to the expression when the same thing is repeated in two ways to avoid ambiguity, *Apearse/caer/bajarse de su (del) burro/ asno* 'to stop, come to an end, or give something up', *En la mula de San Francisco* 'to go by foot'. From these results it might be assumed that in Spanish culture the donkey is seen as best suitable for helping carry out physically demanding tasks as being employed for transportation. The latter viewpoint is even more common as the number of idioms based on the fact that donkeys are often used for riding is the highest from the phrases denoting positive aspects of the animal. This might be due to the peculiarities of climate and terrain of the country: because of the higher temperatures and considerable amount of mountainous areas donkeys being smaller and having higher tolerance for tough conditions were possibly a better option for reaching areas that are less accessible. Therefore, the image of a donkey as an animal used for riding was common in the Spanish culture and consequently became a frequent reference in the phraseological expressions.

Donkey: negative representation

The negative features reflected in the idioms of the three languages were less common than the positive ones: there were 14 idioms that were based on some aspect of the animal that would be considered adverse. However, as the positive representation was actually more neutral, referring to the physical qualities of the donkey and its suitability for hard tasks, the negative features ascribed to the animal might be more representative.

The most common negative feature of the donkey on which idioms are based in all three languages is stupidity: 8 idioms out of 14 contain the feature [+stupid], with the image arguably most prevalent in Lithuanian, with 4 out of 5 idioms based on this feature: Lt *asilo brolis*, *asilo galva*; Sp *Hacer el burro*. Similarly to the idioms about the harsh laugh of the horse, these expressions cannot be understood literally; rather, they make the animal an allegory for the human behaviour or vices.

Another quality that appears in a few English, Spanish and Lithuanian idioms is [+stubborn]: En *As stubborn as a mule,* Sp *Más terco que una mula,* Lt *Buridano asilas,* the latter idiom also having the feature [+stupid]. Interestingly, recent research suggests that the portrayal of the donkey as stubborn is misguided and the donkey is not viewed as a species but rather is regarded in comparison to a horse (Hart 2012). Even though the inaccuracy of the image of the donkey has been discussed, the negative qualities related to the stubbornness or stupidity are still ascribed to the animal.

Conclusions

The present study examined English, Spanish and Lithuanian equine class zoonyms referring to horse and to donkey. Idioms containing horse zoonyms are much more frequent than those with donkey zoonyms, suggestive of the fact that the horse is applicable in a wider variety of activities and is a more prevalent animal. The analysis reveals that the horse generally has a positive image: it is frequently referred to as a draught or a saddle animal and, consequently, is used in war, agriculture or sports, which highlights physical qualities like strength, speed and size. The horse is also often considered to be a valuable possession and therefore can be associated with wealth. The analysis also revealed language-specific features: in English culture horses are used for racing, in Spanish for bullfighting, and in Lithuanian in agriculture. Negative aspects in horse idioms are few: they mainly have literal meaning and are based on the physical qualities or nature of the animal. Lithuanian has the highest number of idioms representing negative aspects of the horse, which may be due to the country's agricultural history and poverty when the horse was seen as a farm animal.

The positive features of the donkey in idioms mainly have literal meaning: zoonyms from the donkey group refer to the physical qualities or aspects of appearance. In all three languages the donkey is seen as an animal of high endurance that is often exploited. From the analysis of the Spanish idioms it is seen that the animal is often used for riding, which is not common in English or Lithuanian and may depend on the peculiarities of climate and terrain of the country: donkeys have more tolerance for mountainous and hot areas. As regards the negative representation, it is the least in Spanish and the greatest in Lithuanian, stupidity and stubbornness being the main qualities ascribed to donkeys. The negative representation and perception of the donkey is highly symbolical and may serve as an allegory for flaws of human character rather than represent the animal itself.

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LYGINAMOJI IDIOMŲ SU ARKLINIŲ ŠEIMOS GYVŪNŲ PAVADINIMAIS ANALIZĖ ANGLŲ, ISPANŲ IR LIETUVIŲ KALBOSE

Santrauka

Šio straipsnio tyrimo tikslas – lyginamoji idiomų su arklinių šeimos gyvūnų pavadinimais analizė anglų, ispanų ir lietuvių kalbose. Nors tekstynuose idiomų su arklinių šeimos gyvūnų pavadinimais

beveik nepasitaiko, jos sudaro svarią frazeologijos žodynų dalį visose trijose kalbose. Straipsnyje buvo keliama hipotezė, kad idiomų palyginimas gali padėti atskleisti sąvokas, kurios yra reikšminės skirtingoms kultūroms. Surinktos idiomos tirtos remiantis komponentine analize: sąvoka su arklinių šeimos gyvūnu buvo suskaidyta į minimalias reikšmės dalis.

Lyginamoji analizė leido iškelti prielaidą, jog gyvūno samprata analizuojamose kalbose priklauso tiek nuo kalbančiųjų geografinės padėties, tiek nuo istorinių tradicijų. Pavyzdžiui, arklių lenktynių sąvoka randama tik anglų kalboje, o asilas yra svetimas lietuvių kultūrai, todėl jo paminėjimas idiomose visuomet turi neigiamą konotaciją. Ispanų kalboje, skirtingai nuo anglų ir lietuvių kalbų, yra daugiau teigiamą konotaciją turinčių idiomų su asilo komponentu nei idiomų su arklio komponentu. Tyrimo rezultatai atskleidė, kad visose trijose kalbose idiomos turi neigiamą konotaciją, kai žmogaus elgesiui apibūdinti vartojami fiziniai gyvūno bruožai.

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: idiomos, arklinių šeimos gyvūnų pavadinimai, komponentinė analizė.

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A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF EQUINE IDIOMS IN ENGLISH, SPANISH AND LITHUANIAN

Summary

Based on the assumption that language reflects the cultural constructs of its users, the article examines idioms containing equine component, i.e. those referring to horse and to donkey, in English, Spanish and Lithuanian. The data are collected from major phraseological dictionaries and are examined applying componential analysis, initially identifying basic meaning components characteristic of horse/donkey, dividing all idioms according to the positive or negative connotation contributed, and then establishing the idiom-distinctive meaning component. The analysis of idioms reveals that, apart from common areas of perceiving animals as a means of transportation, several language-specific traits can be identified, e.g. horse as used for racing specifically in British culture, or predominantly positive attitude to donkey (vs horse) in Spanish. The negative connotation is characteristic of all donkey idioms in Lithuanian. The results demonstrate that the negative connotation across the three languages is conveyed when the animal is attributed personifying features referring to human behaviour.

KEY WORDS: phraseology, idioms, equine, componential analysis, English, Spanish, Lithuanian.