

Małgorzata GÓRECKA-SMOLIŃSKA

State School of Higher Education in Sandomierz
mgsmolinska@poczta.onet.pl

ON THE DIRECTIONS OF BIRDSEMIC DEVELOPMENTS IN ENGLISH AND POLISH

Abstract: In the first place, it needs to be indicated that the purpose set to the paper is to carry out a comparative analysis of female bird metaphors in English and Polish. The analysis must ultimately be treated as an attempt to review and develop the data gathered in such works as: Górecka-Smolińska (2007), Górecka-Smolińska (2008), Górecka-Smolińska (2009), Górecka-Smolińska and Kleparski (2011), and Górecka-Smolińska and Kleparski (2012).

In particular, the focus will be directed at the lexical items *hen*, *duck* and *goose*, which are directly related to one of the leading categories of the bird kingdom, namely **DOMESTICATED BIRDS**. The investigation of the bird-derived lexicon in English and Polish will allow us to observe if both languages are equally prolific in forming bird metaphors. Furthermore, we may hope to be able to examine the directions of birdsemy in the two languages, that is whether both English and Polish are similar as far as the referents of bird metaphors are concerned.

Last but not least, it is to be hoped that the examination of birdsemy developments in English and Polish will be productive enough to answer the question of the origins and reasons for the growth of bird metaphor in both languages.

Key words: birdsemy/bird metaphor, conceptual domain/sphere/zone, conceptual element, symbol/symbolism.

Introductory word

The kingdom of birds has at all times been of interest to humans, in all probability, because of their definitional ability to fly which is perceived in terms of mystery surrounding our winged companions. It is most likely this enigma that has influenced human cognition of birds which seems to be bi-polar, since, on the one hand, people ascribe numerous positive values to birds, making flying creatures the emblems of divine powers, courage or love. On the other hand, our ignorance

of the living conditions of various species of birds makes us perceive them – most frequently mistakenly – as violent and dangerous creatures. Therefore, in what follows we will attempt to draw a verbal picture exhibiting the way representatives of the bird kingdom, most specifically those which lead their lives adjacent to humans, are perceived by their neighbours. It is our aim to draw a verbal image on the basis of a comparative analysis of bird metaphors functioning in the mental lexicons of the speakers of English and Polish. On the grounds of the birdsemic metaphors analysed in the following one may hope to provide at least a partial answer to the question of whether the cognition of birds by the speakers of the two languages is in any respect similar to, or perhaps governed, by any (substantial) differences. Additionally, it is our hope that the investigation of birdsemic developments will enable us to shed some light on the fact that cognitive linguistics is in many respects dependent on cognitive ethology: “... which postulates mental experiences in nonhuman animals and aims to transform comparative psychology, ethology, and related behavioural and brain sciences” (Barber 1993:161).

Hen-, duck- and goose-based metaphors investigated

In the first place, it needs to be stated that the analysis of the semantic developments of *bird*-related phraseology will concentrate on well-known female representatives of the category **DOMESTICATED BIRDS**, that is: *hen*, *duck* and *goose* (cf. the classification proposed in Górecka-Smolińska and Kleparski 2012:113-114). To begin with, a brief etymological enquiry reveals that the noun *hen* appeared as early as in the OE times in the two variants *hen/henn*, and from the very beginning the word has functioned in its primary sense ‘an adult female of the common domestic or barn-door fowl, the male of which is the cock’ (see *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, *A Concise Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*, *Oxford English Dictionary*, *A Concise Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, *Origins. A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* and *Word Origins, The Hidden Histories of English Words from A to Z*; henceforth: CEDEL, CEDME, OED, SCEDEL, SEDME and WO). As the OED shows, the historically primary meaning of *hen* became more general in the 14th century when the lexical item started to be employed with reference to the female of various birds. In the course of time, the semantic development of the word *hen* proved to be productive enough to extend the semantic scope of the word from the macrocategory **BIRDS** to **HUMANS**. At the beginning of the Modern English era, the transferred human-specific senses, namely ‘a woman, a female, a wife’ and the sense ‘a mistress’ developed, and since that time the vocabulary item *hen* was no longer perceived as a term describing solely the female of bird species but also members of the human species. As noted by the OED, *The Routledge Dictionary of Modern American Slang and Unconventional English* and *The Routledge*

Dictionary of Historical Slang (henceforth: CNPDSUE, and RDHS), the figurative senses appeared in the 17th century and survived until the 19th century. Apart from the women-specific metaphoric senses mentioned in the foregoing, *hen* started to function in the 17th century as a general term of endearment, used in a similar manner to the English term *sweetheart*. What is more, while at the very outset the semantics of *hen* evoked mainly positive connotations, the onset of the 20th century brought to the fore the emergence of negatively loaded elements, visible chiefly in the development of the novel pejoratively loaded secondary sense ‘a flamboyant feminine male homosexual’ (see CNPDSUE, OED and *The Routledge Dictionary of Modern American Slang and Unconventional English*; henceforth: RDMAUSE).

In addition to the metaphors discussed above, one observes numerous figurative senses originating in the *hen*-based idiomatic expressions. And so, the adjectival compound *henpecked*, which appeared in the 17th century and continues the verbal form *hen-peck*, is used in present-day English as a derogatory human-specific epithet describing a husband ruled by a domineering wife. Hence, the compound *henpecked* is conceptually connected with the domain /BEHAVIOUR/ with such pejoratively tinted sense elements as: <DEPENDENT> and <DOMINATED>. In addition to *henpecked*, one may quote the set expression *hen-house*, which is a compound used with reference to a predominantly female ménage, a house in which the woman rules. It seems that human cognition of the bird provided the motivation not only for metaphors displaying female independence and domination, but also ones that show the weaknesses of women. Let us quote *mother hen* and its Polish equivalent *kura domowa*, which is far from being flattering and refers to a maternal woman, yet in a negatively tinted context, that is an overprotective woman who is interested only in housework and bringing up children; one that is narrow-minded and has given up her professional life in order to devote herself to family life (cf. Górecka-Smolińska 2007: 35, 2008: 75, *Wielki słownik frazeologiczny PWN z przysłowiami* and *Słownik języka polskiego z frazeologizmami i przysłowiami*; henceforth: WSFP and SJFPF). As Górecka-Smolińska and Kleparski (2012:128) stress, the origins of the semantics of the idiom *mother hen/kura domowa* may be traced in the symbolism ascribed to the bird, that is the fact that the bird is perceived in many cultures as the ideal, loving and protecting mother; nevertheless, the positive symbolic representation of hen does not find comparable positive semantic reflection. At the same time, we may state that the semantics of the complex noun *mother hen/kura domowa* foregrounds such elements of meaning as: <FOOLISH>, <STUPID> and <POINTLESS>, which are in a straightforward manner linked to the conceptual sphere /BEHAVIOUR/. In addition to the formations quoted earlier whose etymological roots may be found in the secondary sense ‘a woman, a female, a wife’ ascribed to the semantics of the lexical item *hen*, we find the nominal phrase *hen party* which – beginning in the 19th century – has been employed as a metaphor of a gathering consisting of women only (see Górecka-Smolińska and Kleparski 2011 and 2012).

Further investigation of *hen*-based formations leads to the 20th century coinages *hen-brained/hen-headed*, represented in Polish by the set phrase *kurzy mózdzek*. The semantics of the compound forms *hen-brained/hen-headed* and *kurzy mózdzek* connotes the negatively tinted secondary sense ‘witless, foolish, or pointless person’ whose origin may have grounds – following Górecka-Smolińska (2009) and *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Symbolism* (henceforth: WDS) – in the symbolic tradition of Central Europe where the bird is frequently perceived as ignorant and foolish. Accordingly, we feel justified in concluding that the linguistic shift of the expressions *hen-brained/hen-headed* and *kurzy mózdzek* from the macrocategory BIRDS to HUMANS displays a direct connection with the conceptual zone /BEHAVIOUR/ and may be said to have been simultaneous with bringing the conceptual elements <FOOLISH>, <STUPID> and <POINTLESS> to the fore.

It appears that human observation of the natural environment results not only in the rise of various *hen*-based expressions connected with the concept of behaviour, but also those that are linked to the parameter of appearance. It is especially visible in Polish where one finds the complex noun *kurze łapki* with its synonymous English set phrase *crow’s feet* (see WSFP and SJPPF). Although the two languages make use of different bird terms, in Polish *kura* ‘a hen’ and in English *crow*, still both idioms constitute part of the colloquial register and are employed with reference to small branching lines in the corners of the eyes. At the same time, WSFP and SJPPF list the simile *wyglądać jak zmokła kura*, that literally translates into English as ‘to look like a wet hen’, and serves as a figuratively tinted comment addressed towards a person who looks extremely dishevelled after getting soaked. On the basis of the data provided, we may observe that both *kurze łapki* ‘crow’s feet’ and *wyglądać jak zmokła kura* ‘to look like a wet hen’ are evidently linked to the conceptual sphere /APPEARANCE/ and their transferred senses highlight negatively perceived elements of human looks, ageing symptoms and unkempt appearance.

The analysis of birdsemic developments in English and Polish will be continued by tracing the semantic specifics of yet another female representative of the category DOMESTICATED BIRDS, namely the lexical item *duck*, represented in Polish by the term *kaczka*. As far as the etymological history of the word *duck* is concerned, the dictionary sources that have been consulted, for example CEDEL, CEDME, OED, SCEDEL, SEDME and WO, suggest that the vocabulary item was present already in Anglo-Saxon times in the form *duce/dūce*, and at that time the noun functioned with the sense ‘to duck, to dive’. In consequence, we see in modern English that the word *duck* is employed not only in its nominal form, but also in the verbal one in the following senses: ‘to plunge/to dive’, ‘to suddenly go under water and emerge again’, and ‘to dip one’s head rapidly under water’. Still when it comes to the OE, the lexical item *duck*, from the very outset, functioned in its primary meaning ‘a swimming bird of the genus *Anas* and kindred genera of the family *Anatidae*’ (see OED). Much like the vocabulary item *hen*, the historically primary sense of *duck* became more universal with time and *duck* began to be employed with reference to the female of

the fowl, the male being the drake. As is the case with the majority of bird names, in various languages *duck* has also been subject to a variety of influences in human language resulting in the formation of numerous *duck*-based metaphors which testify to the extension of the semantics of the lexical item in question from the category DOMESTICATED BIRDS to the macrocategory HUMANS.

Let us begin with a modern English suffixed formation *ducks*, which serves either as a term of endearment or as a familiar form of address. In line with *ducks*, we may quote the diminutive form *ducky* which – according to such lexical sources as the CNPDSUE, OED and *Shorter Slang Dictionary* – is employed, especially by females, as a term of endearment similar to *darling* or *sweetheart*. Likewise, speakers of Polish use the diminutive form of *kaczka* ‘a duck’, that is *kaczuszka* ‘ducky’, to show their affection to a beloved, dear person. Though the term *ducky* induces, chiefly in a female-specific context, positive connotations, it should not escape our attention that since the mid 20th century the noun *ducky* has been employed in male-specific language as well, mainly as a generally negatively tinted expression suggesting homosexuality (see Górecka-Smolińska and Kleparski 2011, 2012 and CNPDSUE). As far as further *duck*-derived transferred senses are concerned, Górecka-Smolińska and Kleparski (2012:158-159) argue that the shift from the category DOMESTICATED BIRDS to the macrocategory HUMANS is visible in AE slang register, where *duck* is employed as a term denoting a fellow or, more specifically, a customer. Moreover, the authors suggest that the lexical item *duck* is by the same token associated with the conceptual domain /PROFESSION/ in AE police jargon when used in the secondary sense ‘a fire-fighter’.

When it comes to *duck*-based compounds, it seems that the sense threads of a considerable number of relevant set phrases are directly connected with the conceptual sphere /APPEARANCE/. And so, such lexicographic sources as the CNPDSUE and OED inform us that in the 17th century the formation *duck-legged* began to be employed in the evaluatively tinted secondary sense ‘having unusually short legs’. With the flow of time the compound *duck-legged* gave way to the idiom *duck/s/s’ disease* which emerged in 20th-century English in the humorously perceived transferred sense ‘the shortness of stature, especially the shortness of legs’. In addition to this, the dictionary sources that have been consulted indicate further lexical development linked to the conceptual domain /APPEARANCE/, namely, *duck butt* which – beginning in the 20th century – has been employed in the secondary sense ‘a short person’ (see CNPDSUE, RDMAUSE and *NTC’s Dictionary of American Slang and Colloquial Expressions*). It seems that the feature that is common for the compounds *duck-legged*, *duck/s/s’ disease*, and *duck butt* is that their transferred senses are grounded in the primary meaning of the lexical item *duck*, moreover, the three metaphors are evidently linked to the conceptual parameter /HEIGHT/ with the conceptual element <SHORT> highlighted (see Górecka-Smolińska and Kleparski 2011 and 2012). The collection of *duck*-based formations whose transferred senses are ingrained in the conceptual zone /APPEARANCE/ seem to be those phrases that foreground the

conceptual aspect <MANNER OF MOVEMENT>. Following the *Thesaurus of Traditional English Metaphors* (henceforth: TTEM) we learn that beginning in the 20th century there surfaced the adjective form *duck-footed* whose evaluatively loaded transferred sense ‘walking with toes turned inwards’ is clearly intelligible, and is evidently deeply grounded both in the extralinguistic observation of the movement of the bird, and in the historically primary sense of the lexical item in question. In a similar vein, *Słownik języka polskiego PAN* quotes the Polish equivalent of *duck-footed*, that is (*mieć*) *kaczkowaty chód*, used, similarly, with reference to people walking with their toes turned inwards. Moreover, it must not escape our attention that the speakers of both languages make frequent use of the compound *ugly duckling* and its Polish counterpart *brzydkie kaczątko*, the complex nouns formed on the basis of the diminutive form of *duck* and *kaczka*, employed with reference to a child or a young person who is perceived as ugly, shy, full of complexes and arousing pity. It goes without saying that the transferred sense of *ugly duckling/brzydkie kaczątko* is linked to two conceptual domains, namely /APPEARANCE/ and /PERSONALITY/ highlighting the conceptual elements: <UGLY> and <SHY>.

The collection of *duck*-based phrases whose figurative senses are embedded in the conceptual spheres /PERSONALITY/ and /BEHAVIOUR/ may be enlarged with other language material. Take, for example, the compound *duck fucker* which, being employed since the 20th century in the negatively tinted sense ‘a lazy person’, is clearly connected with the conceptual zone /PERSONALITY/ (see CNPDSUE and RDMAUSE). As to the conceptual sphere /BEHAVIOUR/ let us quote – following CNPDSUE and *The Penguin Dictionary of English Idioms* (henceforth: PDEI) – the idiom *duck egg* which, similarly to *hen-brained/hen-headed* and *kurzy mózdzek*, designates a foolish person, consequently highlighting the conceptual elements <FOOLISH> and <STUPID>. As far as the origins of the phrase *duck egg* are concerned, the dictionary sources employed above speculate that the etymology may be found in one of the secondary senses ascribed to the lexical item *duck* itself, namely in the game of cricket *duck* is used in the sense ‘no score’. It seems that the expression *duck egg* is not the only one connected with the conceptual domain /BEHAVIOUR/ and whose metaphoric use testifies to the linguistic shift from the category DOMESTICATED BIRDS to the macrocategory HUMANS. In a similar manner, we may quote the idiom *duck soup* which emerged in the 20th century and since then has been used, mainly in AE slang register in the sense ‘a person easy to overcome or cheat’, as well as the set phrase *sitting duck* which functions in a parallel context ‘a person vulnerable to attack from his enemies’ (see CNPDSUE, OED, PDEI and TTEM).

Another female-specific representative of the category DOMESTICATED BIRDS whose semantic and phraseological evolution will be scrutinised here is the lexical item *goose*. Very much like *hen* and *duck*, modern *goose* has its origins in OE times when the word functioned in the form *gós* (see CEDEL, CEDME, OED, SCEDEL, SEDME and wo). Beginning in the 11th century *goose* started to be used in the historically primary sense ‘a general name for the birds of the family *Anatidae*, including *Anser*

and several allied genera'. The semantic history of the lexical item analysed here proves that in the course of time *goose* developed a number of figurative senses, thus becoming clearly linked to the macrocategory HUMANS as well. And so, as argued by *Słownik symboli* (henceforth: ss), the symbolic allusion to the supposed stupidity of the birds was – in all probability – the motivation behind the emergence of the figurative sense 'a foolish person, a simpleton' which emerged in English in the 16th century and survived up to the 19th century. Nevertheless, one may say that Polish continues, at least partially, the semantic history of the word *goose* in the set phrase *glupia gęś* which may be rendered in English as *a stupid goose*, and is employed exclusively with reference to women who are perceived as naïve and stupid (see OED and SJFPF). Note that both English *goose* and Polish *glupia gęś* may be said to be connected with the conceptual sphere /BEHAVIOUR/ bringing to the fore the elements <FOOLISH> and <STUPID>.

Nevertheless, symbolic associations of the bird prove to be responsible not only for the metaphors linked to the conceptual domain /BEHAVIOUR/, but also for those metaphorical transfers that are connected with the conceptual zone /SEX LIFE/. Rowland (1978) and ss inform us that the goose is perceived as a bird of creation and, as such, is an erotic symbol for both sexes. Thus, it may be observed that in the 18th century *goose* gained another female-specific derogatory sense, 'a prostitute', while in the 19th century *goose* developed yet another sex-based transferred meaning, namely 'an act of copulation'. Consequently, the lexical item *goose*, at some point of its semantic history, was and – in fact still is – directly linked to the conceptual sphere /SEX LIFE/. The diminutive form *goosie*, according to the CNPDSUE, has been present since the 20th century in prison slang in the human-specific sense 'the passive or female role in male homosexual relations', thus being strictly related to the conceptual domain /SEX LIFE/. Yet, let us point to the fact that the lexical item *goose* began to be perceived in a more neutral way, and – simultaneously – the 20th century female-specific sense 'a girlfriend, a woman' became devoid of chauvinistic context. Last but not least, let us refer to the well-known formation *goose flesh/skin/pimples* which appeared in 19th century English as a designation of a rough condition of the skin resulting from cold or fear and which testifies to the semantic shift of the word from the category DOMESTICATED BIRDS to the macrocategory HUMANS (see OED, PDEI and TTEM). In Polish we find a synonymous expression *gęsia skórka* used in the same context describing the condition of human skin (see WSFP and SJFPF).

Concluding remarks

On the basis of the data discussed in the paper, we may state that the semantic development of *bird*-derived terms in English and Polish is sufficiently productive to contribute to semantic extension from the macrocategory BIRDS to

that of HUMANS. Moreover, both languages seem to apply the same rules when it comes to the referents of the transferred senses ascribed to the *bird*-based lexicon. In the majority of cases, women are the addressee of the metaphoric language, although many of the lexical items designate not only female members of the species, but also male ones. Furthermore, it is beyond any doubt that the transferred senses of *hen*, *duck* and *goose* that have been examined are, most frequently, employed in a negatively tinted context. Also, it needs to be stressed that the figurative senses assigned to *bird*-related vocabulary items are, in a number of cases, rooted in the symbolic tradition associated with a given bird. Although the two languages seem to have much in common as far as the semantics of bird terminology is concerned, what differentiates English and Polish is that in English we meet numerous secondary senses ascribed to bird names and bird-based formations, while in Polish most of the figurative language operates mainly from set phrases.

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