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ANIMAL SIMILES EXPRESSING HUMAN TRAITS IN ENGLISH AND SERBIAN

Abstract: This paper provides a contrastive analysis of adjectival as ... as similes in English and adjectival comparisons with kao in Serbian, in which the tenor is a human being and the vehicle is an animal stereotypically associated with the given trait, to examine the extent to which specific groups and types of animals are used to express the same or similar human traits in the two languages. A total of 69 English and 39 Serbian similes motivated by animals were examined and categorised according to the meaning of the adjectives used for comparison. The analysis shows that they are used to express a wide range of human characteristics, including behaviour, prowess, state and appearance. Almost half of the English similes and a third of the Serbian similes refer to behaviour, and more than half of the similes in each category in both languages have a negative connotation. Wild animals are more often attributed prowess and power, while farm animals are predominantly seen with subservient features. The findings are indicative of and congruent with the important role that animals play in human language perception. Animal similes not only provide a colourful and creative way of expressing human characteristics but also reflect cultural attitudes towards certain traits and animals.

Keywords: *human traits, comparison, similes, animal similes, English, Serbian*

1. Introduction

As a device for reinforcing meaning, similes have been an indispensable weapon in the speaker's arsenal probably for as long as languages have been spoken, and perhaps, in some form, even longer than that, if we consider the likely possibility that early humans used onomatopoeic sounds to indicate features that resembled

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those belonging to objects whose sounds were being mimicked. Like other types of metaphors, similes are used to highlight features of a given lexical item by comparing the item to one to which those features are traditionally and stereotypically, though not always accurately, assigned in the broader language community.

With the divergence of the human population came the diversification of the languages spoken. As a result, of course, came the cultural and sociological dissimilitude, which is also reflected in the types of meaning associated with the objects surrounding us. Such differences in the use of metaphors relating to the same vehicles have been causing a great deal of trouble later on in inter-cultural contact, making the work of translators and interpreters much more difficult, but consequently much more needed. Hayakawa (1952) illustrates the issue of the communicative value of metaphors in the following excerpt:

‘The inaccuracy or inappropriateness of the informative connotations of our words are irrelevant from the point of view of affective communication. Therefore, we may refer to the moon as “a piece of cheese,” “a lady,” “a silver ship,” “a fragment of angry candy,” or anything else, so long as the words arouse the desired feelings towards the moon or towards the whole situation in which the moon appears. This, incidentally, is the reason literature is so difficult to translate from one language to another—a translation that follows informative connotations will often falsify the affective connotations, and vice versa, so that readers who know both the language of the original and the language of the translation are almost sure to be dissatisfied, feeling either that the “spirit of the original has been sacrificed” or else that the translation is “full of inaccuracies” (pp.120–121)

Most, if not all languages today make use of similes in some way, and the way features are associated to the referent noun greatly depends on the cultural notions surrounding the noun in question. The way we shape our perception of the world, the way we collectively progressively construct our culture inevitably draws from the world around us, leans on things we are exposed to and in contact with on a daily basis.

Since the earliest human societies, animals have been one of the focal points of that contact. From co-existing to hunting, from taming to farming, from consuming to loving, the diversity of our interaction with animals has shaped our perception of animals and hence the meaning we assign to them.

The purpose of this study is contrastive analysis of subsets of similes in the English language and the Serbian language by which human traits are expressed

by comparison to whatever animal is traditionally associated with the given characteristics within these language systems.

The working assumption, based on the expressions usually heard in the two languages, is that there will be some overlapping and common ground in terms of how these features are assigned to animals based on their living conditions (wild or domesticated), life style (e.g. predator or prey), size or other stereotypical imagery: domesticated animals will be more associated with characteristics of ineptitude and servitude, while wild animals will be more associated with characteristics of aggression, prowess and freedom; large animals will be more associated with healthiness and strength; small animals that rely on foraging will be associated with poverty, etc.

This assumption will be put to the test by comparing human traits commonly associated with specific animals in English and in Serbian, with some examination of the origins of the found comparison phrases in relation to the speakers' surroundings.

2. Theoretical background

Similes are a common rhetorical device used in language and literature to compare two seemingly unrelated things, or more precisely, to compare one that is not usually associated with a feature to another which is stereotypically associated with that feature – in other words, invoking a familiar image to fortify the meaning to be conveyed.

To distinguish the constituent elements of the simile structure, Potebnya (1914), as cited by Magamdarov, et al. (2019) lays out the following nomenclature:

‘The logical comparison procedure involves the following components: 1. Comparandum – a concept that requires clarification; 2. Comparatum – a concept explaining the original concept; 3. Tertium comparationis – the fundamental third element connecting the explained and explaining concepts (2019):’

The terms “tenor” and “vehicle” were first introduced in the field of linguistics to describe the two components of a metaphor by the British philosopher and literary critic I.A. Richards (1936:p.96). The “tenor” refers to the subject or concept that is being described or explained through the use of the metaphor. It is the thing that the metaphor is trying to illustrate or clarify. The “vehicle” refers to the image, concept or thing that is used to convey the meaning of the metaphor. It is the means by which the tenor is represented. Richards chose these terms because they evoke the idea of a relationship between two things, much like a person driving a vehicle

to get to a destination. The tenor is the destination or goal, while the vehicle is the means of transportation used to reach that destination. Since Richards introduced these terms, they have become widely used in the study of metaphor and adopted by many other scholars and theorists in the field, hence those will be the terms used in this paper as well.

2.1. Similes in reference books

A simile is defined as ‘a figure of speech comparing two unlike things that is often introduced by like or as (as in *cheeks like roses*)’ (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2023), ‘a word or phrase that compares something to something else, using the words *like* or *as*’ (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2023), or ‘an expression which describes a person or thing as being similar to someone or something else’ (Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2023). What is common in these definitions is that they do not take into account the substantial difference in the degree of association of the comparing feature to the vehicle and to the tenor.

On the other hand, in their authoritative dictionary of the Serbian language, Stevanović, et al. (1990), make this distinction by defining the Serbian word for simile/comparison – *poredba*, as a ‘figure of speech which achieves emphasis by comparing something unknown or lesser known with something familiar’ (p.724).

Grammar books available to the author of this paper did not prove to be a prolific source for examining similes, with only a few authors mentioning comparisons with the positive form of adjectives, and one that analyses comparison structures in more detail, but still only at a technical, structural level.

In their section on the word *as*, Carter and McCarthy (2006) only briefly mention that, as a preposition, it is used ‘with a meaning of equivalence or comparison’ (p.51); in a handful more words, Thompson and Martinet (1986), covering adjectives in the third chapter, say that ‘with the positive form of the adjective, we use *as* ... *as* in the affirmative and not *as/not so* ... *as* in the negative’ (p.39).

Comparison constructions are treated in more detail, albeit at a syntactical level and without any reference to similes, by Huddleston (1984) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002; 2005).

Stanojčić & Popović (2000) reference comparison structures:

‘Since qualifying words indicate characteristics of variable intensity, they can be compared, i.e. they belong to scalable words. Thus, another way of characterising their meaning is through the use of comparison, i.e., a comparison structure.

If the compared things are equal (or similar), the qualifying word is a positive, and the notion used for comparison is expressed with a nominal constituent in the genitive case using the preposition *poput* or – more frequently – in the nominative case using the comparison particle *kao*.’ (p.258)

Piper & Klajn (2013) also lay out the syntactic structure:

‘The equative is a form of the positive used in an equative syntactical construction, in such a way that it takes part in expressing an equal degree of a feature in the members of comparison, [...] along with the other grammatical and lexical tools of expressing that meaning in the same sentence.’ (p.134)

What these two grammar books have in common is again the reference of equality, lacking the asymmetrical association of the compared feature in the metaphor tenor and vehicle, and they still only deal with similes on a technical level. It should be noted here that no distinction is being made between the concepts of simile and literal comparison.

2.2. Simile is (not) a type of metaphor

For a more substantial examination of similes, we turn to metaphor theorists, since the question of whether similes are a type of metaphor or not, or the other way around, is a matter of scholarly debate.

For instance, Black (1962:pp.31–37) discusses and dismisses other existing views of metaphor – the “substitution view” (p.31), where the metaphoric expression is merely a substitute for one with a literal meaning; and its special case, the “comparison view” (p.35), in which the ‘writer holds that a metaphor consists in the *presentation* of the underlying analogy or similarity’ [emphasis in the original] (p.35), which would include similes – and supports the “interaction view”, according to which similes stand on their own ground, although he concedes that ‘no doubt the line between some metaphors and some similes is not a sharp one’ (p.37).

Bredin (1998) asserts that though similes differ from ordinary comparisons in that they are not symmetrical (p.74), but rather predicative comparisons (p.75), they are, ‘none the less, a mode of comparison, and this is why they are quite different from metaphors, which are not comparisons in any shape or form’ (p.77), going on to say:

‘Simile has always been overshadowed by metaphor. Even when metaphor has been mistakenly defined as a disguised or elliptical simile, simile has still been

given a back seat, as if its very explicitness made it, somehow, less interesting. Of course the two figures are not altogether without a degree of likeness: both of them, after all, establish a connection between two (or more) different objects. But there the likeness ends. For simile compares the objects but metaphor conceptually assimilates them to one another. It is misleading even to suggest that simile may be a stage on the road to metaphor. It is not a half-way house, but the fruit of a process that is independent and complete in itself, and which establishes a relatedness among things that is different in kind, not just in degree, from that of metaphor.' (p.78)

On the other hand, Ricoeur (2003:pp.26–30) examines and agrees with Aristotle's "subordination of simile to metaphor" (p.28), concluding that the only difference between the two is in the explicitness of the comparator in similes. That similes and metaphors are merely two forms of expressing the same device is also the view of Lakoff and Turner (1989):

'It is extremely common to see metaphor as a matter of linguistic expressions alone and not of conceptual structure. This is the assumption behind the grammar-school distinction between metaphor and simile. [...]

This attempt to define metaphor in terms of syntactic form misses entirely what metaphor is about: the understanding of one concept in terms of another. Statements of both forms can employ conceptual metaphor. The kind called a simile simply makes a weaker claim. [...] On the whole, the syntactic form of an utterance has little, if anything, to do with whether metaphor is involved in comprehending it.' (p.133)

Ultimately, whether they are indeed a type of metaphor, or a distinct stylistic device, similes are an effective tool to provide vivid attribution of a feature associated with a vehicle to another object, the tenor – much more so than, say, modifying an adjective with an intensifier, because they 'are easy to understand. If you see the phrase as dead as a doornail, you don't need to know what a doornail is, simply that the whole phrase means *totally dead*' (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2017:p.200).

2.3. Animal similes

As said before, our lives have always been permeated by contact with, and exposure to, animals. We have had a long history of interacting with animals in a variety of ways. Initially, some were a threat, some were a meal, others a mystery. As time went on, some became bearers of cultural or religious significance. We

found ways to make friends with some animals, and began to make use of them for protection, hunting, transportation, labour, entertainment or affection. Others, we grew and bred and kept in large numbers for meat, milk, eggs etc.

The complexity of our relationship with animals is growing still, and it is no wonder then that we have integrated them so much into our linguistic patterns, one aspect of which pertains to similes.

Some animal similes are objectively motivated by the traits of the animals, either as natural attributes and usual behaviour. If one were to imagine a human performing the same kind of behaviour as sheep or cows, it would be seen as *silly* or *stolid*, respectively. Mice usually live in hiding and make an effort to not make noise or otherwise attract attention, and flee when noticed, so one may say they are indeed quite silent most of the time.

In other cases, the traits may be exhibited when in specific situations – hornets, for example, instinctively defend their nest by frantically attacking the invader, which corresponds to the personified trait of being in the mental state of mad/angry.

Many of these similes are not motivated by the animals' factual characteristics, but rather by the associations the language community makes and maintains about the given animals. When a peacock struts his feathers around courting a female, it is first personified through the assignation of a sense of pride over his plumage, and then the personified meaning is used to fortify an image of actual human behaviour. In the case of the eel, a physical trait, the mucous on its skin, makes it difficult to catch, and when the meaning is extended to humans, it comes to signify evasiveness and deceit as a personality trait.

Even further, some similes originated from rhyming (*as drunk as a skunk*, *as snug as a bug in a rug*), or from the animal's name resembling a noun carrying a specific feature (*as crazy as a loon* is likely to have been motivated by the meaning of the word *lunatic*). From the perspective of bugs infesting carpets, they live in a forest-like environment, but from the human perspective, they are embedded in a small, thick habitat and are hard to oust, which may even justify the simile. Similarly, skunks are unlikely to be or behave like they are inebriated, which indicates that this particular simile is not motivated by much else than rhyme. As such, these and other similar cases are not relevant for the purposes of this study.

3. Inventory of animal similes with as ... as

Language production can provide endless combinations, and even though metaphoric expressions rely on existing and established tropes, whose meaning

is rooted and routinely used by a language community, there will always be new comparisons being made, which is why one cannot compile an exhaustive list of animal similes, but rather one can only hope to have compiled a comprehensive one.

This paper only examines English similes of the *as* + *ADJECTIVE* + *as* + *NOUN* pattern and Serbian similes of the *ADJECTIVE* + *kao* + *NOUN* pattern as primary structures. The expectation here is that expanding the sample to include similes where the adjectival components are substituted for verbal ones with the use of other comparators, such as *like*, would not bring much added value to the study, but would rather predominantly showcase traits that are also expressed by the corresponding primary structures.

Searching the Internet for lists of animal similes in English begins to yield repetitive data already within the first ten hits, with three websites² depleting the pool of similes to the point where no new ones were found within the next four pages of results. Some similes were dropped due to synonymy. The consolidated list, after filtering out items motivated by little more than rhyming, provided 69 similes, expressing comparison of 52 different traits through 54 zoonyms.

The data for Serbian was assembled by compiling lists retrieved from two websites³ that appeared prominently in the search results, and filtering out items that do not fit the target structural pattern. In a few instances, the adjectival structure was derived from the verbal original, after lexicographical verification, in order to encompass as many similes as possible. The obtained list contained 35 attributes expressed in 39 similes with as many zoonyms.

Lacking a readily available organised inventory of similes is a limitation of this study, so the possibility remains that some similes have been missed. This should not, however, affect the results in a significant way.

4. Analysis

Out of the 52 traits expressed with animal similes in English, close to a half – 44.2%, to be precise – pertain to behaviour (26.9% with a negative and 17.3% with a positive connotation). Ten of the total number (i.e. 19.2%) concern prowess, or a lack thereof, while 25.0% declare a specific state. Six traits (11.5%) are features of appearance, two of which refer to looks and four to size.

² <https://eslvault.com/list-of-animal-similes/>

<http://www.livingeggs.co.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Similes-for-animals.pdf>

<https://owlcation.com/academia/animal-similes>

³ <https://prirodahrivatske.com/2018/12/23/izreke-s-zivotinjama/>

<https://opusteno.rs/knjizevni-kutak-f21/narodne-poslovice-i-poredjenja-sa-zivotinjama-t14845.html>

In Serbian, 34 traits were found, out of which 43.8% relates to behaviour (seven negative and seven positive), 18.8% to ability, 25.0% to state and 12.5% to appearance.

4.1. Behaviour

When it comes to behaviour, we can distinguish praise and criticism through positive and negative connotations.

In both languages, power is, as expected, assigned more to wild animals – *as brave as a lion* has a direct counterpart in Serbian, with *as fierce as a tiger* along the same note in English and *srčan kao soko* <*as brave/spirited as a falcon*> in Serbian. Goats are also admired in English for their skills on rocky terrain. The servient role of domestic animals is reflected in both languages in *as meek/gentle/innocent as a lamb* = *krotak kao jagnje* and *as loyal as a dog* = *vjeran kao pas*. And while the generic dog is loyal in English, a specific breed, the bulldog, is tenacious – a likely reflection of its origin of being bred in the UK for bull-baiting. Cats and kittens, on the other hand, are vehicles for playfulness in both languages. A hard-working person is *as busy as a bee* = *vrijedan kao pčela* in both languages, in English they are also *as eager as a beaver*, while in Serbian they are likened to moles and ants.

The other side of the coin reveals that animal similes are more prolific in highlighting people's negative behavioural characteristics, slightly in Serbian, but significantly so in English. There are two similes with a direct pair in both languages, *plašljiv kao zec* = *as timid as a rabbit* and *tvrdoglav kao magarac* = *as stubborn as a donkey*, and two traits expressed with different zoonyms. While anger is expressed in English through comparison with a hornet or a March hare, which is 'a brown hare in the breeding season, noted for its leaping, boxing, and chasing in circles' (Soanes & Stevenson, 2009), in Serbian it is a lynx, probably due to its feral nature. A tentatively matching trait can be seen in *as quiet as a mouse* and *šutljiv kao riba* <*as taciturn as a fish*> or *miran kao bubica* <*as tranquil as a bug*>. Other attributes in English expressed in this group reflect a variety of negative traits, from being *as cold as a fish* to *as silly as a goose/monkey/sheep*, while what remains in Serbian is *dosadan kao muha/uš* <*as boring as a fly/flea*>, *kradljiv kao vrana* <*as thievish as a crow*> and *otrovan kao kobra* <*as poisonous/toxic as a cobra*>.

4.2. Ability

In terms of ability, all three Serbian positive similes in the group have a direct match in English, giving us the following pairs: *brz kao zec* = *as swift as a hare*, *jak kao bik* = *as strong as an ox* and *mudar kao sova* = *as wise as an owl*. The remaining ones in English without a pair in Serbian are *as agile as a cat/monkey* < *pokretljiv/gibak kao mačka/majmun* >, *as fast as a gazelle/horse/jungle cat* < *brz kao gazela/konj/velika divlja mačka* > and *as graceful as a gazelle/swan* < *graciozan kao gazela/labud* >. Similes expressing ineptitude also present with one matching pair – *spor kao puž* = *as slow as a snail*, with the addition of tortoise in English for the same trait. There are two more in English: *as clumsy as a bear/elephant* < *nespretan kao medved/slon* > and *as weak as a kitten* < *slab kao maće* >, and one in Serbian denoting a lack of mental capacity: *glup kao guska/kokoš* < *as stupid as a goose/hen* >. There is one more matching pair, *as cunning/sly as a fox* = *lukav kao lisica*, but whether its connotation is positive or negative in meaning must be derived from the context, as both *cunning* and *lukav* can be construed as either crafty and ingenious or scheming and deceitful.

4.3. State

The human states expressed with animal similes are overwhelmingly negative in meaning. In Serbian, only one has a positive connotation, *slobodan kao ptica (na grani)* = *as free as a bird (in a tree)* >, and the other seven denote criticism, with only *siromah kao crkveni miš* having a counterpart in *as poor as a church mouse*. English offers two more similes for praise – *as happy as a clam/lark* < *srećan kao školjka/ševa* > and *as healthy as a bull/horse* with a tentative match to < *zdrav kao bik/konj* >, and a total of seven for negative or undesirable traits, including *as blind as a bat* < *slijep kao slijepi miš* >, which has obvious motivation, and *sick as a dog/parrot* < *bolestan kao pas/papagaj* >, the origins of which, are unclear. There seems to be no explanation why the dog would be any more sick than some other animal, while the parrot version is attributed to various sources:

‘The origin of this expression is uncertain. References to people being ‘as melancholy as a sick parrot’ have been found as early as the 17th century. In the 1970s in West Africa, there was an outbreak of the disease of psittacosis or parrot fever, which humans can catch from birds. At about this time, footballers and football managers started using this expression to say how they felt when they had lost a match.’ (Hands, et al., 2012)

4.4. Appearance

The remaining group of similes refers to looks, in which there is only one trait that is paired with the same animal in both languages: *debeo kao svinja* = *as fat as a pig*, and it does not take a lot of imagination to understand the motivation. For a similar meaning, English also offers *as big as a whale* and *as heavy as an elephant*, though only a fraction of their usage refers to human beings. Other similes in English are *as bald as a badger/coot*, *as hairy as a gorilla*, *as tall as a giraffe* and *as tiny as an ant*.

What is curious, though, is that all the remaining Serbian similes other than the one with a pig refer to colour: *bijel kao labud* <*as white as a swan*>, *crn kao gavran* <*as black as a raven*>, *crven kao rak* <*as red as a crab*>, *sijed kao ovca* <*as grey/white as a sheep*> and *šaren kao detlić* <*as colourful as a woodpecker*>. The latter is perhaps not used as much in this form for humans, but there is a colloquial version with the participial adjective *išaran*, for which the closest translation would be *variegated* or *doodled*, to depict a person with numerous tattoos.

5. Conclusion

While some scholars argue that similes and metaphors are two distinct devices, others maintain that similes are a type of metaphor that differ only in the explicitness of the comparator. Regardless of their classification, similes are an effective tool to provide vivid attribution of a feature associated with an archetypal object to another object where the feature is not regularly present.

The analysis of animal similes in English and Serbian shows that they are used to express a wide range of human characteristics, including behaviour, ability, and state. Both languages have similes that praise and criticise people, but negative connotations are more prevalent in both languages.

The use of animal similes to describe human behaviour is more common in both languages, with close to half of the total traits found in this category. This reflects the traditional human-animal relationship, where domesticated animals are seen more through a subservience lens, while wild animals are perceived as brave and powerful. This perception is mirrored in both languages, with the lion, tiger, and falcon being the epitome of courage, while domestic animals such as the lamb and dog are known for their loyalty and innocence, though work animals, horses and oxen, embody strength.

Negative behavioural traits are more frequently expressed through animal similes, especially in English. This reflects cultural differences between the two languages, but more importantly, also the human sense of superiority and supremacy over animals.

On the same note, the states being expressed through animal similes are mostly negative in both languages, with only a few positive ones found. This indicates that animal similes are used more often to criticise than to praise people for their current state.

Overall, the analysis of animal similes in English and Serbian highlights the important role that animals play in shaping human language and perception. Animal similes not only provide a colourful and creative way of expressing human characteristics but also reflect cultural attitudes towards certain traits and animals.

The initial expectation that there will be some direct equivalents in both languages has proven to be correct, with 14 instances of similes linking humans to the same animal with the same trait. There are also several cases where the *tertium comparationis* was the same trait, but the vehicle was a different animal. The overlapping happens for various reasons. Many of the similes are of old Greek, Latin or biblical origin, which would be their entry point into both languages. Others are motivated by the observable traits of the animals.

Similes that rely on cultural references or specific knowledge that may not be shared across cultures or languages may not be easily understood. As a result, translating similes can be a challenging task that requires a deep understanding of both the source and target languages and cultures, and this paper hopes to have shed some additional light on the matter.

A more extensive study might be warranted to corroborate these findings by examining their frequency and context in representative corpora.

Further research may also be carried out to confirm the expectation that verbal and other comparison structures with the same animals as vehicles will yield a sufficiently approximate distribution of features.

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FIGURATIVNE PRIDJEVSKE POREDBENE KONSTRUKCIJE SA ŽIVOTINJAMA U ENGLESKOM I U SRPSKOM JEZIKU KOJIMA SE IZRAŽAVAJU LJUDSKE OSOBINE

Rezime

Predmet ovog rada je kontrastivna analiza pridjevskih poredbenih konstrukcija sa *as ... as* u engleskom i sa *kao* u srpskom jeziku, u kojima se ljudsko biće po određenoj karakteristici poredi sa životinjom koja se stereotipno vezuje za tu karakteristiku, kako bi se ispitalo u kojoj mjeri se određene grupe i vrste životinja koriste u oba jezika za izražavanje istih ili sličnih ljudskih osobina. Ispitano je ukupno 69 pronađenih poređenja u engleskom i 39 u srpskom jeziku koja su motivisana životinjama i kategorisano prema značenju pridjeva koji su bili predmet poređenja. Analiza je pokazala da se poređenjima sa životinjama izražava veliki raspon ljudskih osobina, uključujući ponašanje, sposobnost, stanje i izgled. Skoro polovina poređenja u engleskom i trećina

u srpskom jeziku odnosi se na ponašanje, a preko pola poređenja u svakoj kategoriji u oba jezika ima negativne konotacije. Divlje životinje češće se vezuju sa sposobnošću i moći, dok se domaće životinje uglavnom vide u podređenim ulogama. Nalazi istraživanja ukazuju i poklapaju se sa značajem životinja u jeziku. Poređenja sa životinjama izvor su slikovitog i kreativnog izražavanja ljudskih karakteristika, ali i odraz kulturoloških odnosa prema određenim osobinama i životinjama.

► *Ključne riječi:* ljudske osobine, poređenje, životinje, engleski, srpski.

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