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THE EXPRESSIVE VALUE OF ANIMAL-RELATED LEXICAL ITEMS IN VIETNAMESE (BASED ON MATERIALS FROM VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE TEXTBOOKS FOR GRADES 2, 3, AND 4 – *THE CONNECTING KNOWLEDGE WITH LIFE SERIES*)

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the expressive value of animal-related lexical items in Vietnamese language textbooks for Grades 2, 3, and 4 in the Connecting Knowledge with Life series from a literary perspective. Drawing on reception theory and poetics, the study demonstrates that when embedded in children's literary texts, animal-related lexical items transcend their purely denotative function and become artistic devices rich in evocative and expressive power. Through techniques such as personification, symbolism, metaphor, and a narrative–lyrical tone, animal images are constructed as “characters” endowed with inner lives, conveying humanistic values such as love, empathy, and a sense of responsibility, while also gently critiquing certain undesirable behaviors. The findings affirm the significant role of this category of lexical items in nurturing aesthetic sensibility, developing literary appreciation competence, and shaping the personality of primary school students, thereby contributing to the enhancement of literary teaching effectiveness within the framework of the new general education curriculum.

KEYWORDS: Expressiveness, lexical items, animals, Vietnamese language, Connecting Knowledge with Life

1. INTRODUCTION

Within the ecosystem of characters in children's literature, animals are not merely objects reflecting the natural world but have been elevated into highly symbolic artistic images. From the perspective of reception theory, Hans-Robert Jauss argues that readers always approach a text with a particular “horizon of expectations” [7]. For children, this horizon is often closely associated with the tendency to “assimilate” the objective world into their inner world through the mechanism of personification. In this context, animals are not only capable of speaking and thinking but also become entities that carry and convey humanistic and moral values.

From a poetics perspective, animal-related lexical items, when incorporated into literary texts, no longer function as purely denotative units but are transformed into units endowed with expressive meaning. According to Roland Barthes, these linguistic units generate “codes of meaning” that enable readers to associate the text with cultural values and emotional resonances beyond the text itself [1]. This transformation creates a distinctive aesthetic space in which the boundary between humans and nature is blurred, corresponding closely to the perceptual, emotion-driven psychology and associative thinking of primary school students.

The Vietnamese textbooks for Grades 2, 3, and 4 in the Connecting Knowledge with Life series [14] reflect a modern editorial orientation by integrating a system of literary texts-including animal tales, poems, and fables-in which animal characters appear with high frequency. Works such as “The Story of the Gourd”, “The Sparrow and the Lagerstroemia Flower”, and “The Sky Inside an Egg” not only provide biological knowledge but also construct a vivid and imagery-rich linguistic system. In these texts, animal-related lexical items function as “artistic codes” that help students perceive emotional nuances ranging from innocence and purity to philosophical lessons about love and compassion.

However, current research on this category of lexical items tends to focus primarily on educational or pedagogical perspectives. As noted by La Thi Bac Ly (2003), Vietnamese children’s literature requires greater scholarly attention to its poetic characteristics and artistic language in order to avoid utilitarian and overly rigid approaches. The lack of in-depth studies on expressive value in relation to artistic tone and voice inadvertently diminishes students’ emotional engagement with the aesthetic qualities of literary texts [8].

Therefore, this article aims to clarify the expressive value of animal-related lexical items in Vietnamese textbooks within the Connecting Knowledge with Life series. These lexical items are examined as a distinctive artistic medium that contributes to shaping the stylistic identity of children’s literature and serves as an important bridge in fostering personality development and moral education for younger generations.

2. CONTENT

2.1. Animal-Related Lexical Items as a Means of Constructing Literary Images

In children’s literature, animal-related lexical items are not used solely for naming purposes but function as a distinctive artistic medium. Through mechanisms such as personification and symbolism, this lexical category constructs vivid and evocative literary images.

Example 1:

“The bee makes honey, loving flowers;

The fish swims, loving water; the bird sings, loving the sky”.

(*Lullaby, Material 6, p. 28*)

In this example, the system of animal-related lexical items undergoes a transformation from biological designation to artistic symbolism. The images of the “bee”, “fish”, and “bird” not only reflect the natural world but also convey “emotional codes” through the repeated use of the personified verb “love,” which appears three times.

From Roland Barthes’s semiotic perspective, these lexical items no longer function as purely denotative units but become signs carrying connotative meaning. By associating characteristic activities (making honey, swimming, singing) with affection for origins and living environments (flowers, water, the sky), the text enables children to readily internalize lessons about attachment and communal belonging. This mode of expression corresponds to primary school students’ animistic thinking, transforming animal-related lexical items into a medium for emotional cultivation and the construction of humanistic values.

Example 2: In the text “Folk verse about Birds” (Vietnamese 2, Volume 2), animal-related lexical items are extensively personified to construct an artistic world imbued with a distinctly childlike sensibility. Through action verbs and descriptive adjectives such as “scurrying along” (chicks), “walking while hopping” (starlings), “prone to rambling” (Black-Throated Laughingthrush), and “playful and mischievous” (tailorbirds), the author transforms biological traits into vivid psychological features characteristic of children.

From a poetics perspective, each animal functions as an emotional symbol: the drongo represents competitiveness, the magpie evokes cleverness, while the owl, drowsy at dusk, symbolizes stillness and tranquility. This mode of naming, combined with personality traits, creates a rich expressive semantic field that both reflects the diversity of human society and aligns with students’ associative thinking. These creatures not only enliven the natural world but also serve as an artistic medium through which children develop empathy and an awareness of different personality traits.

The use of address terms such as “con”, “chú”, “bác”, and “bé”, together with imagery-rich naming practices, actualizes the process of personification, transforming animals into characters with rich inner lives. This system of lexical items extends beyond mere naming to convey the narrator’s attitude. In the Connecting Knowledge with Life series, animal-related lexical items are often associated with an innocent and affectionate narrative voice, creating a warm and trustworthy aesthetic space. The interaction between personal address terms and emotion-related verbs generates a familiar cultural code that allows children to project their inner world onto the characters. Through this process, the animal world becomes a miniature society in which students learn to appreciate moral values and compassion. This mode of

expression effectively turns literary language into a bridge between children's concrete thinking and their aesthetic emotions.

2.2. Positive Expressive Value: A World of Pure and Humanistic Emotions

The system of animal-related lexical items in textbooks does not merely depict the natural world but also conveys positive, humanistic expressive values. Through affectionate address nouns and adjectives denoting inner qualities, literary language constructs a world of pure and gentle emotions, as seen in expressions such as “chú mèo” (little cat), “bé thỏ” (little rabbit), “bác gấu” (uncle bear), and “đàn chim nhỏ” (a flock of little birds). This linguistic strategy helps students develop compassion, empathy, and nurtures the seeds of benevolent character formation.

Example 3:

“The bee makes honey, loving flowers;

The fish swims, loving water; the bird sings, loving the sky.

If humans wish to live, my child,

They must love their comrades and fellow human beings”.

(Lullaby, Material 6, p. 28)

In this poem, the author employs the images of the bee, the fish, and the bird to convey a message about love and harmony in life. The bee, a symbol of diligence, constantly works to gather nourishment for its hive and community. The image of the small, hardworking bee collecting nectar day after day resembles human laborers who tirelessly work so that each drop of sweetness may be created through their own effort. From this image, children learn enthusiasm, dedication, and a spirit of contribution to work.

The image of the fish swimming in water represents adaptability and harmony with the living environment. Water is the source of life for fish, and the fish's affection for water reflects care and attachment to its habitat. Rather than resisting their surroundings, fish blend into the current, embodying a philosophy of coexistence and acceptance.

The image of the bird singing and flying across the sky symbolizes freedom and the aspiration for liberation. Birds are often associated with flight, vast open spaces, and boundless horizons. Through this image, the author conveys dreams and the desire for freedom in human life-particularly the aspirations of farmers who wish not to be confined by the constraints of land but to soar higher, travel farther, and explore the world beyond their immediate surroundings.

Through depictions of the diligence and harmony of animals such as the bee, fish, and bird, the author suggests that love and mutual empathy are the foundations for building a peaceful and happy community. Humans are encouraged to learn from nature in order to become useful and fulfilled members of society.

Example 4: In the reading text “The Young Grass Smiled” (Vietnamese 2, Volume 2, p. 57) [14], the personality, behavior, and lifestyle of the brown swallow embody a deeply humanistic spirit of support and sharing. Set against the backdrop of spring awakening, the story depicts swallows returning from the South as the season arrives. In a park, the brown swallow discovers that a young grass plant is crying because it has been trampled on.

The swallow’s compassion and kindness are expressed not through passive observation but through active concern and assistance. Notably, the brown swallow does not act alone; instead, she calls upon many of her friends to work together to solve the problem. This collective action highlights solidarity and an awareness of the importance of cooperation in overcoming difficulties. The act of arranging dried grass to form the message “Do not step on the grass!” not only resolves the immediate issue but also conveys a meaningful message about environmental respect and protection. This episode reflects the swallow’s sensitivity and ecological awareness, shared by the entire flock.

The story concludes with the image of the young grass smiling and expressing gratitude to the brown swallow—an emotionally rich and engaging ending. It serves as a symbolic affirmation of solidarity, friendship, and compassion among living beings in nature. Overall, the story of the brown swallow and the young grass is not merely a simple tale of helping and sharing, but a profound message about love and respect for the environment—values that children can learn from and apply in their everyday lives.

Through a system of lexical items rich in expressive nuance, animal images become vivid symbols of sincere friendship, sharing, and kindness. Rather than delivering moral lessons through dry didactic instruction, ethical values are naturally internalized through the compassionate actions of characters such as the little sparrow, little bee, or uncle bear.

This positive expressive value not only enriches students’ language development but also directly awakens a love for nature and respect for life within children’s inner world. When children are able to perceive the joy and sorrow of animals through literary texts, they gradually develop environmental awareness and a humane attitude toward life. It is precisely the power of language that transforms animal stories into a bridge connecting young hearts with the noble beauty of humanistic values.

2.3. Gentle Critical Expressive Value through Animal Imagery

In addition to positive values, this category of animal-related lexical items also offers sharp reflections on negative human traits such as laziness, selfishness, and cunning through animal imagery. However, rather than employing harsh criticism, the texts typically adopt a humorous tone and indirect fable-like

narration. This approach allows children to recognize shortcomings in a gentle manner, thereby encouraging self-reflection and personal moral development.

Example 5: In the reading text “The Cat Goes Fishing” (Vietnamese 3, Volume 2, p. 55) [14], the author does not merely describe scenes and actions involving the cats but also conveys multiple layers of meaning related to social, cultural, and ethical issues. The elder cat and the younger cat go fishing together: one sits by the pond while the other goes to the river. The elder cat becomes sleepy and lies down, embodying impatience and a desire for comfort—traits commonly found in human behavior. In contemporary society, the pursuit of comfort and convenience often leads people to become reluctant to exert effort or engage in sustained work.

The younger cat, meanwhile, abandons fishing to join the playful rabbits, symbolizing the choice between comfort and responsibility. Humans, too, frequently face similar decisions between fulfilling obligations and indulging in leisure activities, and not infrequently choose comfort over duty. Although assigned the task of fishing, both cats fail to carry it out and instead adopt a passive attitude, avoiding effort and labor. This behavior reflects a mindset present in certain segments of modern society, where individuals prefer idleness and passivity over diligence and responsibility.

Through the depiction of the two cats’ laziness, the text establishes a clear parallel between animal behavior and human conduct, thereby offering a gentle critique of passive and indolent lifestyles in contemporary life.

Employing animal images as symbolic “stand-ins” for human flaws represents a sophisticated artistic strategy that reduces the heaviness and rigidity of moral instruction. Rather than engaging in direct reproach, lexical items describing animals’ negative traits create a necessary aesthetic distance, enabling children to internalize moral lessons in a relaxed and voluntary manner. This technique is a familiar poetic feature of animal tales and fables, in which negative characteristics are “defamiliarized” through the lens of animal imagery. Such an approach not only generates humor but also leaves a lasting impression on young readers, thereby achieving a more subtle and enduring educational effect in the formation of students’ character.

2.4. Artistic Techniques in Creating the Expressive Value of Animal-Related Lexical Items

The artistic creation of expressive value through animal-related lexical items lies not only in the depiction of physical characteristics but also in the subtlety of lexical selection and the combination of rhetorical devices. Through techniques such as personification, simile, and metaphor, authors transform otherwise dry, denotative linguistic units into vivid and dynamic artistic images. The interplay between affectionate address nouns and systems of verbs and adjectives denoting emotions and mental states constructs an animal world imbued with the “breath” of human life. This constitutes a key factor that makes children’s literary texts engaging, stimulates imagination, and naturally guides students’ aesthetic emotions.

Example 6: In the reading text “The Persimmon of the Little Rabbit” (Vietnamese 3, Volume 2, p. 44) [14], the story opens with the little rabbit caring for a persimmon tree and eagerly awaiting the chance to enjoy its sweet fruit. When the persimmon finally ripens, the rabbit waits but cannot reach it, and a flock of birds arrives asking to eat the fruit. Although the rabbit initially refuses, it later realizes that sharing will bring greater joy to many others. Through this narrative, the author conveys a message about kindness and compassion.

The little rabbit is portrayed as a patient and benevolent character, diligently watering the persimmon tree and patiently waiting for the fruit to ripen. The birds, although initially intending to eat the rabbit’s persimmon, subsequently recognize that this is inappropriate and return to help the rabbit find another persimmon. The central message of the text emphasizes that sharing and compassion are precious values in life. By sharing the persimmon with the birds, the rabbit not only brings happiness to itself but also to others, highlighting the importance of harmony and mutual support in social life.

Expressive artistry is constructed through the harmonious combination of poetic devices. Personification transforms animals into subjects endowed with emotions and actions similar to those of humans. Meanwhile, metaphor and symbolism enable each animal to carry distinct cultural meanings and moral lessons. Especially when embedded within narrative and lyrical contexts, these lexical items achieve their full expressive potential through resonance with narrative flow and emotive tone, creating a distinctive aesthetic appeal that captivates young readers.

2.5. The Role of Expressive Value in Primary Students’ Reception of Literature

The expressive value of lexical items is not merely a linguistic component but plays a pivotal role in the process of literary reception among primary school students. At this developmental stage, children’s thinking gradually shifts from image-based perception toward logical reasoning, while remaining strongly emotion-driven. Therefore, lexical items rich in expressive nuances function as a “catalyst” that helps children overcome the barriers posed by abstract or dry concepts, enabling them to enter the world of artistic imagery in a natural and engaging manner. The ability to perceive emotional nuances—from purity and kindness to gentle criticism—contributes significantly to the development of aesthetic competence and emotional intelligence. It is precisely this emotion-guiding function that transforms literature into a subtle instrument of character education, allowing students not only to read words but also to grasp the profound humanistic meanings embedded in animal imagery.

Example 7: In the reading text “The Substitute Player” (Vietnamese 2, Volume 1, p. 34) [14], animal-related lexical items are employed to convey important values and lessons concerning life, friendship, care, and responsibility. The story of the little bear and its friends playing football is not merely entertaining but also rich in humanistic significance, helping children understand moral values in an accessible way.

Care and responsibility are reflected in the little bear's actions: the bear not only wishes to join its friends on the football field but also becomes aware of its own limitations. Rather than feeling discouraged about being considered slow, the bear chooses to improve itself by taking on the role of a substitute player, supporting its teammates by retrieving the ball. Every day, the little bear arrives at the field early to practice and enhance its football skills. This behavior demonstrates perseverance and determination in overcoming difficulties and fostering self-development.

After a period of consistent effort, the little bear is rewarded with surprise and recognition from its teammates, who eventually invite it to join the team. This recognition reflects appreciation for the bear's persistence and improvement. Ultimately, the little bear realizes that being a substitute player also has value and meaning. This realization strengthens its self-confidence and reinforces the importance of solidarity and cooperation within a team.

In summary, animal-related lexical items in "The Substitute Player" serve not merely to describe the natural world but function as an effective medium for transmitting humanistic values and essential life lessons about friendship, care, responsibility, perseverance, and self-belief.

The system of expressive values enables students to establish deep emotional identification with literary characters, thereby stimulating imagination and enhancing literary appreciation skills. This constitutes the most natural bridge for children to access core moral and humanistic values through vivid artistic images rather than abstract theoretical instruction. Notably, emphasizing this category of lexical items directly contributes to the development of literary reading comprehension competence, fully meeting the objectives of quality and competency development outlined in the new General Education Curriculum.

3. CONCLUSION

Animal-related lexical items in Vietnamese textbooks for Grades 2, 3, and 4 in the Connecting Knowledge with Life series have moved beyond their purely denotative function to become a multivalent artistic medium. Through techniques such as personification and symbolism, animal imagery conveys humanistic messages and moral lessons in a subtle and nuanced manner, establishing a high degree of compatibility with children's distinctive modes of literary reception.

Identifying and fully exploiting the expressive value of this category of lexical items is not merely a linguistic task but also a crucial component of effective literary pedagogy at the primary level. Such an approach contributes to stimulating imagination, nurturing students' inner emotional lives, and shaping sustainable aesthetic appreciation skills. This constitutes a foundational basis for realizing the objectives of comprehensive development-encompassing both linguistic competence and moral character formation-for younger generations within the framework of the new general education curriculum.

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