

## A Contrastive Analysis: Animal Metaphors in Persian and English

Shahram Afraz<sup>1</sup>, Amir Mirahmadi Kia<sup>2\*</sup>

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1. Dept. of English Language, Qeshm Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qeshm, Iran.

2. Ph.D. Student in TEFL, Dept. of English Language, Qeshm Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qeshm, Iran.

\* Corresponding Author's Email: amir.mirahmadikia@yahoo.com

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**Abstract** – Animal metaphors are generally used in the speech act of insulting; however, some of them are also believed to have positive connotation. The aim of this report is to discover the relationships between the interpretation of animal metaphors in Persian and English. A second goal is to discover if animal metaphors have positive connotation. In animal terms, there are some agreements and differences in interpretations of their meanings. So this report wants to show these similarities and differences between L1 (first language) and L2 (second language). This report emphasizes the role of immediate, remote and specially cultural context in the interpretation of animal metaphors.

**Keywords:** animal metaphors, connotation, L1, L2

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Metaphor is one of the figurative uses of language which definitely plays an important role in learning. The term metaphor has been defined in different ways, covering a wide variety of phenomena ranging from a literary figure of speech to everyday cliché expressions. The former usually calls for imaginative minds to appreciate and the latter are so commonplace that at least for some, they have lost their metaphorical values. Larson (1984, p.247) believes that a metaphor is a figure of speech which involves a comparison of some likeness. Newmark (1988, p.84), on the other hand, is of the idea that "one serious purpose of metaphor is to describe an entity, event or quality more comprehensively and accurately and in a more complex way than is possible by using literal language". Newmark in another book (1988b, p.104) gives a similar definition terms and observes that a metaphor gives two purposes of referential and pragmatic nature at the same time. The first aim is to ensure that the point in a question is clarified and the second is to impress the reader. A metaphor is a word or phrase which makes differences between one object and idea and another (Goddard & Paterson, 2000, p.117). So when it is said "He is an ox" (Larson, p.251) in the English language and culture, the listener remembers the similarities between a person and the characteristics of that animal like "being strong, huge or unintelligent". Animal metaphors are used a lot. It seems that in many languages animals are good examples of comparing with humans. So humans use animals to describe characteristics of humans based on the characteristics of animals according to their languages and cultures. Due to this, Gee (1999, p.69) believes that metaphors are a rich source of cultural models. For example, "He is a pig." (Larson, p.250) has different meanings in different cultures, so it has a

connotation of "being dirty" but in Larson's culture it has the meaning of "someone who doesn't listen to people". Therefore, in TEFL the treatment of animal metaphors cannot be approached in an unwanted way. To provide good information about this claim, this study deals with the similarities and differences of animal metaphors and their interpretations between two languages: Persian and English. Additionally, this study shows the usage of animal metaphors in the speech act of insulting in most of the languages some of which have positive connotations, too.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Metaphors have been classified in different ways by different scholars. For example Newmark (1988) has suggested six types of them: 1) dead, 2) cliché, 3) stock, 4) recent, 5) original metaphors, and 6) adopted metaphor. Crystal (1992) also introduced four kinds of it: 1) conventional, 2) poetic, 3) conceptual, and 4) mixed metaphors. For the purpose of this report, there are two kinds of metaphors: *Dead* and *Live* metaphors. *Dead* metaphors are the ones which become the current usable idiom in one culture because of its extra usage in speaking (Larson, p.249).

The expression "leg of the table" is an example of a dead metaphor because "one no longer thinks about a person" (Larson, p.249) when hearing that metaphor. On the other hand, the live metaphors are the ones which are created according to the needs of the moments and they are paid more attention that time. For example, in "Albert wouldn't have to be fishing for complements this year", "fishing for complement" will not remind one of the mental pictures of the ocean (Larson, p.250).

The present study is concerned with metaphors of the kind "A" is a "B" where both the topic A and the image B have a common characteristics, i.e., a tertium comparationis (Jaszczolt, 1995, p.2). Therefore when it is said "Ali is a tiger", it is usually interpreted as meaning that both Ali and tiger have a common characteristic such as ferocity. For instance, in the case of the example "Ali is a tiger" why the characteristic of ferocity should be regarded as the point of similarity and not aggression? Now, it so happens that in this case both of the properties of ferocity and aggression are very close to each other and belong to the same semantic field (James, 1980, p.86-96); therefore the selection of either will not make much difference to the analogy at hand.

However, consider "Ali is an octopus". In this case, we usually do not regard having tentacles as constituting the tertium comparationis, rather the metaphor is interpreted as having a topic which refers to a person of wide ranging influence and a person who has so to speak a finger in every pie. At this point the notion of Saliency becomes useful.

In interpreting metaphors usually one would choose a property which in addition to being salient is also relevant to the topic of the metaphor in question. This point once more emphasizes the significance of context, specially cultural context in interpreting the analogy of the metaphors.

### 3. METHOD OF RESEARCH

The present research is concerned with metaphors used in everyday life in ordinary conversational exchanges as opposed to original metaphors used in creative works of literature. This does not mean that their use is exclusively confined to oral verbal communication; rather it means that if ever they are used in written literature, it usually reflects the ordinary use of language in everyday life. This statement also does not imply that in ordinary daily conversational exchanges people never produce original and innovative metaphors. Despite the fact that idioms and metaphorical usages have a special place in the syllabus of English majors, yet specifically speaking it seems that animal metaphors have not received their due attention. Perhaps this is because it is assumed that meaning of animal metaphors are quiet transparent and there is no need to spend extra time and energy on them. Fraser`s findings (1981, p.440) indicate that even in the case of apparently transparent animal metaphors like “He is a pig” there are differences of interpretations depending on the mother tongue of the student subjects in question. It seems that both in Persian and English they have a special place among all possible metaphors. And of course there are some researches which have verified this intuition. For example, Davies and Bentahila quote from Norrick (1986) who found out that “ animals make up by far the largest class of simile vehicles: animals appear in almost 38% of the total of 366 entries for stock similies” (p.53). Another reason for the selection of animal metaphor is the fact that apparently they are widely used as insults. Fraser for instance used six English animal metaphors with speakers from different mother tongues in order to obtain at least a preliminary feeling for a comparison of insult terms across a range of languages (1981, p.439). Stone in his textbook of “ Modern English Idioms with Exercises “ (1975) offers two separate lists: 1) domestic animals with 12 entries, 2) wild animals with 25 entries. So the comparison of the lists are done in this report. The list was compared with two scholarly Persian dictionaries of : i) Encyclopedic Dictionary of Dekhoda (1998 reprint) and ii) Persian Dictionary of Mo`in (1981 reprint), and the same procedure was undertaken with the English equivalents of those metaphors. That is, once more the same list was checked against: i) Shorter OED (1991), ii) Webster`s New Collegiate Dictionary (1976), and iii) The Longman Lexicon (1981).

### 4. RESULT and DISCUSSION

The first finding of the research concerns the significant agreement in both Persian and English regarding the interpretations of certain examples. Table 1 gives the list of animals for which more than 50% of the sources consulted gave the same interpretations.

**Table 1.** *Most common interpretations in both languages*

<b>Animal</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
donkey	Persian	stupid	English	stupid
fox	Persian	Crafty	English	cunning

gazelle	Persian	softness of eyes	English	softness of eyes
peacock	Persian	Beautiful	English	vain
rat	Persian		English	treacherous
cat	Persian	Impudent – lovable	English	spiteful woman
dog	Persian	faithful – vicious	English	Worthless - gallant
goat	Persian	stupid – docile	English	licentious man
monkey	Persian	ugly – fool – playful – mimic	English	Fool –playful – mimic
chicken	Persian	inexperienced – weak	English	inexperienced
turkey	Persian	Changeable	English	chameleon

As Table 1 shows, there are similarities and differences between the interpretations of animal metaphors in two languages of Persian and English. For example, *donkey* in both Persian and English languages have the common meaning of insulting. From a different point of view, *gazelle* and *peacock* are commonly used in Persian as terms of *endearment*, more or less in the same way as the word *monkey* and *chicken* which have somehow positive connotation in English. In the case of “cat”, Persian sources had suggested both interpretations of “spiteful” and “loveable”. The English sources, on the other hand, has proposed the interpretation of both “cowardly” and “gallant” for “dog”. This point indicates the fact that even in the case of frequently used animal metaphors, one cannot expect completely unanimous interpretations.

If Persian regardless of the findings of zoology believe turkey to be changeable, then it is necessary to consider being changeable as a distinctive feature of the prototype “turkey”. The same assumption is true on the part of the English speakers for chameleon. Hence different speech communities with different cultures will and do attribute quite different properties to the animal metaphors in question.

Although in some cases people from widely different linguistic and cultural backgrounds propose the same interpretations, at the same time it seems that a characteristic typical of one animal in one culture is associated with a completely different animal in a different culture. The interpretations collected for the present report revealed many such contrasts between Persian and English .

Next, Table 2 gives the most outstanding cases of similarity of interpretations. In some cases the similarity of interpretations can not be traced back to the distinctive characteristics of the animals in question; for example, the softness of eyes in the case of gazelle was assumed to be salient by both Persian and English sources. Other interpretations seem to be related to stereotyped associations which happen to be common to both Persian and English, for instance, the interpretation that “foxes are cunning “ or “wolves are treacherous “ can be traced in both cultures to traditional folk stories about these animals.

**Table 2.** *Similar interpretations in two languages*

<b>Animal</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>	<b>Language</b>	
donkey	stupid	Persian	English
fox	crafty / cunning	Persian	English
gazelle	softness	Persian	English
cat	graceful	Persian	English
lion	spiteful	Persian	English
dog	brave	Persian	English
snake	treacherous	Persian	English
parrot	mimic	Persian	English
bull / cow	big	Persian	English
monkey	playful	Persian	English
mouse	timid	Persian	English
crocodile	hypocrite	Persian	English

Even a cursory look at Table 2 shows that most of the animal metaphors used in both languages have a negative figurative meaning. The fact that animal metaphors in general have negative connotation is a common belief among speakers of different languages, which has also been born out by research.

Table 3 gives examples of animal metaphors with positive interpretations in both languages. Three of the entries given in the list has mainly negative connotations.

**Table 3.** *Metaphors with positive connotations*

<b>Animal</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
Gazelle	Persian English	softness of eyes , graceful
Lion	Persian English	brave , strong , graceful brave , outstanding , courageous
Lamb	Persian English	gentle gentle , innocent
Swan	Persian English	graceful , whiteness , clearness graceful , melodious
dog*	Persian English	faithful gallant
monkey*	Persian English	playful
cock*	Persian	youngster , early riser ,

	English	punctual melodious
Ant	Persian English	industrious , perseverance industrious
Owl	Persian English	inauspicious wise
Dove	Persian English	peace loving , herald peace loving , innocent

Table 4 shows highly negative figurative uses of animal metaphors which as mentioned repeatedly includes an overwhelming majority of metaphors.

**Table 4.** *Metaphors with negative connotations*

<b>Animal</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
donkey	Persian English	stupid , frivolous , ignorant stupid , obstinate , ignorant , conceited
fox	Persian English	crafty cunning , untrustworthy
dog	Persian English	fidgety , despicable , dirty worthless , despicable , surely , cowardly
cat	Persian English	spiteful , unfaithful spiteful
snake	Persian English	treacherous , malicious mischievous , devil treacherous , worthless
bear	Persian English	fat , gluttonous uncouth , rough , unmannerly
monkey	Persian English	ugly fool , mischievous
mouse	Persian English	timid , sneaky , small , weak treacherous , timid , nervous , sly
crocodile	Persian English	hypocrite hypocrite
wolf	Persian English	cruel , ferocious ferocious , rapacious , cruel
rhinoceros	Persian English	insensitive insensitive

In some cases the interpretations assigned in both languages, although related to similar characteristics of animals in question, differ in attitudes or relative degree of evaluation . For example, “fox” seems to have the same kind of connotations in both languages, yet English

usually defines it as being “cunning”, whereas Persian sources prefer to call it as being “crafty”. This shows a more charitable attitude on the part of Persian than English. Another example is monkey, although it invokes a similar kind of reaction in both cultures, in Persian it is characterized mainly by the attribute of ugliness whereas in English it is regarded as being mischievous and fool.

Table 5 gives a contrastive summary of the interpretations of animal terms preferred by Persian and English sources with the number of sources assigning those interpretations.

**Table 5.** *Contrastive interpretations*

Animal	Dominant Interpretation	
	Persian	English
dog	Faithful	worthless
goat	Grumpy	licentious
turkey	Changeable	pompous
peacock	Beautiful	ostentatious
bear	Fat	uncouth
rabbit	Smart	clumsy
cow/bull	Stupid	big
lion	Strong	brave
monkey	Ugly	mimic , fool
cock	Youngster	leader
owl	Inauspicious	wise

## 5. CONCLUSION

Animal metaphors are not interpreted in Persian and English cultures in the same way. Fraser said that “The Farsi speakers who wants to tell an English speaker that he is sneaky and uses the term “fox”, the animal used in Farsi, is of course telling him that he is crafty and clever, not sneaky “ (1981, p.440). As it was observed in this report, the animal metaphors in both Persian and English languages have similarities and differences, in a way that some of them have exactly the same interpretations; on the other hand, some of them have completely different interpretations. Additionally, some animal metaphors are used for insulting in both Persian and English languages. The role of culture specially deserves considerable attention because as the findings of the present report revealed the same animal could be used figuratively to propose different connotations or the same figurative meaning can be conveyed by using different animal terms. The present report, on the other hand, showed that although animal metaphors are generally used as a means of insulting, yet they are also used with positive connotation like endearment terms. The report also showed that although the two languages have at least one animal which is used metaphorically to convey stupidity, timidity, worthlessness, treachery and so on, yet the animals might differ between the two languages.

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