Cat Metaphors in Malay and English Proverbs

aNurul Nadia Muhammad*, bSabariah Md Rashid*

aFaculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Sedrang, Selangor, Malaysia
bFaculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

Abstract

Animals have been widely used metaphorically to convey certain meanings related to human beings in Malay and English. One such animal, cat, has a common proposition of being fickle and independent (Lakoff & Turner, 1989). This paper reports on the findings of a study that focused on the use of cat metaphors in Malay and English proverbs. It sought to ascertain whether the common proposition proposed by Lakoff and Turner is applicable to the data of this study. The study also aimed to examine the similarities and differences in the meanings associated with the cat metaphors in both Malay and English proverbs. Data of the study comprised Malay and English proverbs related to cats. They were selected from Malay and English books and online databases of proverbs. The data analysis focused on the examination of the meanings and metaphorical schemas of the respective proverbs using the Conceptual Metaphor Theory and the Great Chain of Being framework. The analysis revealed that the meanings associated with cat in Malay and English proverbs do not conform to the common proposition of Lakoff and Turner. The paper concludes that various differences in meanings are associated with the metaphorical schemas of the English and Malay proverbs, which are attributed to cultural differences of the two languages in question.

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1. Introduction

The use of animal metaphors in the expressions of many languages of the world is pervasive. Such use of metaphors is not merely as a poetic device, but also as language elements which convey specific messages in everyday communication. As proposed by Lakoff and Turner (1989), metaphors have been regarded as a matter
of thought rather than just linguistic ornaments per se. This is to say that metaphors mirror our perception, experience and understanding of the world. Furthermore, metaphorical language allows people to comprehend one kind of entity in terms of another. Through the mapping of the source and target domains, the attributes loaded in the source domain are transferred onto the target, thus “allowing the target categories to be apprehended in novel and often revealing ways” (Haslam, Loughnan and Sun, 2011, p.1).

One source domain that could provide rich metaphorical expressions is the animal kingdom, perhaps due to the close relationship between people and animals since ancient times. In this light, it is common to see that, to a certain extent, people are sometimes likened to animals. Research has shown that animal metaphors are often used to connote negative meanings in many cultures. This is because of the higher order form relegated to human beings compared to that of animals, as reflected in the Great Chain of Being (GCB) (Lakoff and Turner, 1989). Nevertheless, positive meanings are also associated with animals, such as lion and bull, which conceptualise courage and strength (Rodriguez, 2009).

Another animal, cat, commonly used in metaphorical expressions of varied languages to denote specific human characteristics and behavior, is the subject of this study. Being one of the most common domesticated animals, it is usual to notice the use of cat metaphorically in conventional language use and more specific figurative expressions. In a corpus analysis of animal metaphors, Deignan (2005) pointed out that in English cat was used negatively to connote greed, in particular, in the context of criticism of business activities. She further discussed that in English, cat metaphors (associated with literal cats) are generally related to the ideas of greed and selfishness. This somewhat contrasts the proposition made by Lakoff and Turner (1989), i.e., cat is fickle and independent. In view of this, the study aimed to investigate whether this proposition is reflective of metaphorical expressions such as proverbs related to cats in Malay and English. Specifically, it sought to answer three research questions: 1) Do Malay and English proverbs related to cats conform to the common proposition of cats as fickle and independent?; 2) What are the salient meanings conveyed by the Malay and English proverbs related to cats?; and 3) Is there any difference in the meanings associated with cat metaphors in the Malay and English proverbs?

2. Literature Review

Animal metaphors have been one of the subject matters examined by many scholars with interest in the field of cognitive semantics. The common analysis framework of researchers who work within this field is the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) as proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). The theory, which describes the mapping of two domains known as source and target domain, has been adopted widely in the analysis of metaphorical expressions related to various concepts, among others, concept of emotions (Kövecses, 2000), virtue, such as perseverance (Sabariah Md Rashid, 2011), and inflation (Silaški and Đurović, 2010). Such studies have looked at how these concepts are conceptualized in the identified metaphorical expressions. In this study, the animal, cat, which is the focus in the source domain, is used to convey specific meanings in the target domain of human beings. In other words, at a general level, a conceptual metaphor HUMAN BEINGS ARE ANIMALS underlies the proverbs related to cat in both Malay and English.

Relevant to the analysis of the expressions, in particular for animal metaphors, is the GCB (Lakoff and Turner, 1989), which is a cultural model that talks about the hierarchical order of forms of beings. Each form of beings like humans, animals, plants and inanimate objects together with their properties such as reason, instinctual behavior, biological function and physical attributes are placed in order, with the humans occupying the highest level followed by animals, plants and finally inanimate objects at the lowest level of the hierarchy. Lakoff and Turner further describe that the form of beings at the higher levels has all the properties possessed by the kind of beings at the lower levels and not otherwise. For instance, inanimate objects only have physical attributes but plants which are placed at a level higher than inanimate objects have physical attributes as well as biological functions. This cultural model allows us to understand general human character traits in terms of nonhuman attributes, thus resulting in the construction of conceptual metaphors, such as PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS. Deriving
from the Great Chain of Being and at a higher level of abstraction or generalisation, we thus have PEOPLE BEHAVIOUR ARE ANIMAL BEHAVIOUR, PEOPLE CHARACTERISTICS ARE ANIMAL CHARACTERISTICS metaphor, and so on.

Animal metaphors have been studied from various perspectives, with focus on the source domain, particularly on the manifestation of the concept ANIMAL in the metaphorical expressions and those on various animals in spoken and written discourse. In fact, resulting from the interest in the relation between language and culture, many researchers have studied animal metaphors cross-culturally i.e., by comparing data from two or more languages in question: English and Spanish (Fontecha and Jimenez Catalan, 2003; Rodriguez, 2009), English and Mandarin (Wang and Dowker, 2008; Song, 2009; Wei and Wong, 2012), English and Persian (Esmail Faghih, 2001; Talebinejad and Dastjerdi, 2005), Malay and Arabic (Sabariah, Pabiyah and Nurul Nadia, 2012). The literature on animal metaphors has informed us that culture does play a vital role in determining the meanings attached to the animal metaphors as different language will have different meanings ascribed to the same animal. This is to say that one same animal may not be equally conceptualised in different languages and cultures.

One example of this can be seen in the work of Talebinejad and Dastjerdi (2005) who examined animal metaphors in English and Persian. In their study, the meanings for 44 animal metaphors in these two different languages were provided by the native speakers of each language. The findings revealed that animal metaphors in Persian and English are similar to a certain extent; however, most of them are culture-specific. To illustrate a few, turkey in English is used to conceptualise a stupid person. In contrast, turkey refers to a hypocrite and an opportunist in Persian. What is illustrated here is although turkey is negatively perceived in both languages, the meanings attached to this animal is different.

In a similar vein, a study conducted by Imran-Ho Abdullah (2010) focused on ascertaining whether the common proposition of animals is universal or specific to a particular culture. Malay proverbs related to dogs were examined and the findings of his study were compared to the common proposition of dogs proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), i.e., loyal, dependable and dependent. The analysis of the study revealed that dogs in Malay were weak, despised, bad or ignorant and not as what is suggested by Lakoff and Turner’s proposition. The study suggests that there is a difference in the proposition and metaphorical schemas in the semantics of animal proverbs and it is related to the social and cultural beliefs upheld by the community of that particular culture. Similarly, our study focused on examining data related to cat metaphors, analyzing meanings conveyed by the data.

3. Methodology

Data of this study were Malay and English proverbs related to cats. In this study, proverbs are defined as short metaphorical statements that convey implied meaning or ideas related to human condition, attitude or behavior and have been handed down from one generation to another. Thus, any proverbs related to cats (contain the word ‘cat’ in the expression) was selected as the data for analysis. However, those which have simile-like structure or what is categorised as perumpamaan (similes) in Malay were excluded from this study as they have different mechanisms from metaphors, i.e. they make direct comparison using explicit comparative markers such as ‘like’ and ‘as’ in English and seperi, bagai, laksana, ibarat, umpama, bak and macam in Malay. The proverbs that contain the word ‘cat’ in English and kucing in Malay were collected from online databases as well as printed sources such as dictionaries and books of proverbs. As for Malay proverbs, most of them were selected from Pusat Rujukan dan Persuratan Melayu Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, ATMA UKM (an online database for Malay proverbs) and several books of Malay proverbs written by MBRAS (1992), Zulkiflee Yazid (1996) and Abdullah Hassan and Ainon Mohd (2001). On the other hand, English proverbs were collected from the Internet and also some books of English proverbs (Collis, 1992; Bertram, 1993; Nandy, 2001). The initial search of the data generated a total of 55 proverbs – 35 Malay proverbs and 20 English proverbs related to cats. However, after
excluding similes from the list, only 28 proverbs (15 English proverbs and 13 Malay proverbs) related to cats were selected for the analysis.

This study is qualitative in nature. The data were analysed using the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) framework, specifically, the Great Chain of Being (GCB) (Lakoff and Turner, 1989). The analysis focused on the mapping across the two domains and the metaphorical schemas manifested in the source domain, which underlie the conveyed meaning of the cat-related proverbs. Using a text-based approach, the analysis of the data provides linguistic instantiations of cat metaphors in proverbs, as well as how the various metaphors are structured in the source domain, in terms of the salient features related to cat mapped onto the target domain, i.e., meanings conveyed by the manifestation in the source domain.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of Malay and English proverbs related to cats revealed that various meanings that conceptualise human characteristics and behaviour are conveyed by the manifestation of different aspects related to this animal. A few similar meanings associated with cats are found in both Malay and English proverbs. Proverbs in the two languages frame cats as authoritative, fierce or dangerous and untrustworthy. However, there are also some differences in the meanings conveyed by the cat proverbs in both languages, which are further discussed in the following section. The discussion first focuses on the salient meanings commonly found in both Malay and English proverbs followed by the meanings manifested or conveyed only in one language or culture.

4.1. Cat as authoritative

A meaning commonly conveyed by many Malay and English proverbs related to cats is that of authority. This is manifested in the cat’s nature of being a predator. As a matter of fact, the image of cat and mouse in a ‘predator-prey relationship’, structures the source domain of one English proverb (When the cat is away, the mice will play) in the data, which is mapped onto the intended meaning, i.e., someone who is taking advantage of a situation by not doing his work when the person in charge or having authority is away or absent. The emphasis here, however, is on the situational behaviour of the cat’s absence that affects the behaviour of the mice. Within the GCB, cat is placed at a higher level than mouse within the animal’s group hierarchy. Furthermore, looking at the size of these two animals, cat is bigger and stronger compared to mouse, thus making it more powerful in terms of strength and thus conveying the meaning of ‘authority’.

In the same vein, the concept of authority seems more common in Malay proverbs compared to English. The cat and mouse relationship provides the mapping onto the power relationship of human beings in some Malay proverbs. For instance, the proverb Kucing lalu, tikus tiada berdecit lagi, (Cat passing through, mouse is silent) refers to the behaviour of people, i.e. who are usually noisy but become quiet in the presence of an authoritative figure. Other Malay proverbs that convey the meaning of authority are Bila kucing tidak bergigi, tikus berani melompat tinggi, (When cat is toothless, mouse dares to jump high) and Kucing pergi, tikus menari, (Cat is away, the mouse dances). Another Malay proverb related to cats that captures the meaning is Kalau kucing tiada bermisai, takkan ditakuti tikus lagi, (If the cat’s whiskers are gone, the mouse will not be afraid of it anymore). It means that when someone of a higher position in an organisation is fired from his position, he will lose support and respect from his subordinates. Another Malay proverb Awak tikus, hendak menampar kepala kucing, (You mouse, want to hit cat’s head) conveys the meaning of doing something impossible. Looking at the situation in which the cat and mouse are in, it is very unlikely for the mouse to attack the cat judging by its size and strength, which is typical in a cat and mouse game. This animal-related situation is mapped onto a human situation, which emphasizes the meaning of some unlikely situation with regards to power relationship. Based on these examples given, we can say that cats in Malay and English proverbs are conceptualised as authoritative people who have the power to control others below them.
4.2. Cat as fierce/dangerous

Cats also carry the meaning of being fierce and dangerous in Malay and English proverbs. These characteristics are manifested in the cat’s nature of being an aggressive animal. This is reflected in the English proverb (Play with cats and expect to be scratched). It means dealing with a fierce or dangerous person would be harmful. To explain, people may have observed how the cats behave while playing with them and there is a fact about cats having quick reversal of mood and behavior. For example, they can suddenly become aggressive while playing by extending their retractable claws and scratching the person they are playing with. In this sense, the aggressive behaviour of cats is mapped onto a fierce and dangerous person. The meaning is also captured in Malay proverbs, such as Jangan dibangunkan/dikejutkan kucing tidur, (Do not wake the sleeping cat up), which means to not disturb the silent enemy. In this light, the sleeping cat is viewed as being harmless which contrasts to its aggressive behavior when it awakes. Here, cat is viewed as possessing a threat. Thus, keeping it unconscious may avoid the potential trouble that might come. The emphasis here is on the situational behaviour of cat being harmless under a subconscious state, which is mapped onto the meaning of possible situation of people. The silent enemy must not be disturbed as that party may react dangerously when they are provoked.

4.3. Cat as untrustworthy/pretentious

Another common meaning found related to cats in Malay and English proverbs is untrustworthy or pretentious. For example, English proverb (Beware of cats that lick from the front and claw from behind) refers to a two-faced person who has the possibility to double-cross or back-stab another person. In the proverb, cat shows a contrasting behavioral pattern. The action of licking is considered to be harmless; however, when it shows its claws, there is a high possibility that it will scratch anything or anyone in the near surrounding. In this light, such behaviour of cats is used to portray an untrustworthy or pretentious person. The aspect that is highlighted in the source domain is the cat’s changing behavioral pattern which is then mapped onto the human characteristic of being untrustworthy or pretentious.

As for the data in Malay language, the proverb Kucing menyembunyikan kuku, terlihat panggang berubahlah laku, (Cat hides claw, upon seeing grill changes behavior) also captures the meaning of untrustworthiness. It refers to a bad person who pretends to be kind until he finds something of his interest. The proverb frames a situation in which we will notice the changing behavior of a cat upon seeing something that it likes. For a person to behave in such manner, we can say that he is unreliable and cannot be trusted.

Apart from the similarities in the meanings conveyed by the data from both languages discussed, differences in meanings related to cats in Malay and English are also found in the proverbs. Meanings that are found only in English proverbs are discussed below.

4.4. Cat as cowardly

An example of an English proverb that shows cat of having cowardly behavior is (A shy cat makes a proud mouse), which refers to a situation where one partner of some business takes undue advantage of the other partner’s mild or cowardly nature. This meaning is manifested in the source domain of the proverb, whereby cat is portrayed as losing its power and being manipulated by the mouse. This is contrary to what it commonly seems to be whereby the cat usually has total control of the mouse. What is emphasized here is the behaviour of the cat, which behaves cowardly and causes the mouse to act in an unexpected manner, showing courage and taking
control of the cat. This cowardly animal situation related to cat is mapped onto a real life situation of a person who is taken advantage of by his business partner.

4.5. Cat as useless

As discussed earlier, cat in English proverbs is also associated with the meaning of uselessness. This is exemplified by the proverb (Keep no more cats than will catch mice) which conveys a meaning that serves as a reminder not to support anyone who does not or cannot do something useful for another person in return. This proverb illustrates the relationship between cat and human, motivated by a situation where a cat is no longer doing its job of hunting down and killing mouse as it is supposed to do. The emphasis on such behavior is mapped onto the intended meaning, which reminds people that when a cat is no longer performing its supposed task, one is advised not to keep it longer as it brings no benefit to the owner. In this regard, cat is viewed as useless.

4.6. Cat as lazy

Another meaning that is associated with cats in English proverbs is laziness. This is exemplified in the proverb (All cats love fish but hate to get their paws wet), which means everyone wants success but many lack the self-discipline to become successful. This proverb capitalizes on the non-determined behavior of cats (in this case, to soak their paws into the water) in order to gain something that they want (refers to the fish), which is mapped onto the meaning that emphasizes the undesirable behavior of people who want success but are not willing to work for it. In other words, the situational metaphor related to cat is mapped onto the concept of laziness as manifested in the meaning of the proverb.

In contrast to the propositions of English proverbs, various meanings are also conveyed by the Malay proverbs that utilise cat metaphors, such as cat as opportunist, insignificant and shameless as illustrated by some examples found in the data.

4.7. Cat as opportunist

In the Malay data, cats are also associated with the concept of opportunist, which is instantiated by the Malay proverb Ikan tergantung, kucing tunggu, (Fish is hanging, the cat waits). Specifically, the proverb conveys the meaning of a person hoping to get something desirable. This meaning in the target domain is conceptualised by a situation in the source domain of the proverb, which triggers the image of a cat either waiting patiently to get a fish or waiting for the right time to steal it. The situational behaviour of the cat is mapped onto the characteristic or behaviour of an opportunist who will use every opportunity to achieve his goals.

4.8. Cat as insignificant

In Malay proverbs, cats are also regarded as insignificant. This is exemplified by the Malay proverb Anak kucing menjadi harimau, (Kitten becomes tiger) which refers to a situation in which a poor human being becoming rich, or a lower-ranked officer being promoted to a higher position in the administration. This proverb can be understood through the Great Chain of Being. In the animal hierarchy, cat is placed lower than the tiger as both these animals belong to two different groups, namely, tame animals and wild animals. Even though both of these animals are known as predators, a tiger is superior in terms of size and strength, making it a stronger predator than the cat. Thus, ‘kitten’ in this proverb refers to an insignificant person. It is interesting to point out that in the earlier part of the discussion; cats are associated with authority which is contrary to the meaning
conveyed by this proverb. However, when it is compared to an animal that is placed at a higher level in the GCB hierarchy, the cat becomes powerless and the authoritative symbolised-meaning is then associated with the tiger.

4.9. Cat as shameless

Another salient meaning related to cats in Malay proverbs is shameless, which is conveyed by the proverb *Tak akan aib kucing biang*, (Never in disgrace, a sexually aroused cat). This is an example of a Malay proverb that conveys the meaning related to negative human characteristic ‘shameless’. Specifically, the behavioural characteristic of the cat [*kucing biang* (sexually aroused cat)] is mapped onto the intended negative meaning related to people. What is emphasised by the proverb is the fact that this animal behaviour portrayed in the source domain of the proverb although uncalled for is acceptable for animals. The message, however, for human beings who are endowed with reasoning ability, is that this kind of behaviour would be appalling and immoral and should never be displayed in public. From the cultural perspective, those who commit such an act are shameless and not regarded well by the society.

5. Conclusion

The study has revealed that the examined data related to cats do not conform to the common proposition of cat proposed by Lakoff and Turner (1989), i.e. cats are fickle and independent. To a certain extent, Malay and English share some common meanings whilst other meanings are specific to one language and culture. In other words, meanings ascribed to the same animal may differ from one language to another depending on the social and cultural environment that the language users live in. The findings also illustrate that the use of cat and other animals in the source domain of specific proverbs convey meanings that are related to the hierarchical order of the respective animals within the Great Chain.

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