

Cognitive Structuring of Zoomorphic Symbols in French Discourse: Mechanisms and Interpretations

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Abstract: This study explores the cognitive mechanisms underlying the formation of zoomorphic imagery in human cognition. Drawing on examples from the French language, the article analyzes how metaphorical modeling, cognitive projection, associative reasoning, categorization, and inferential logic shape animal-based symbolic representations. These cognitive mechanisms collectively contribute to the conceptualization and linguistic expression of animal traits as human characteristics. Through culturally embedded metaphorical structures, the study highlights how animal imagery conveys social, emotional, and evaluative meanings. The results contribute to a deeper understanding of conceptual metaphor and cognitive semantics in cross-cultural contexts.

Keywords: Cognitive mechanisms, Zoomorphic imagery, Metaphorical modeling, Association, Categorization, Inference.

Introduction: Language, as a cognitive instrument, facilitates the formation and communication of symbolic meaning. In this regard, zoomorphic images, representations based on animal traits, are deeply rooted in cognitive mechanisms such as metaphor, association, categorization, and conceptual mapping. These images often stem from the human interpretation of animal behavior, grounded in perceptual, emotional, and social experiences (Ilyas, 2004). They are solidified within the mental lexicon through repeated cultural encoding and linguistic reinforcement (Chudinov, 2003).

Cognitive mechanisms in this context include the psycholinguistic and neurobiological processes of information processing: perceiving, evaluating, interpreting incoming information, and making decisions on its basis. These processes involve attention, memory, perception, evaluation, interpretation, and the generation of responses. In essence, cognitive mechanisms form a system of intellectual operations that help an individual absorb external stimuli and produce meaningful interpretations

[<https://psychology.stackexchange.com/questions/27407/whats-the-exact-definition-of-a-cognitive-mechanism>]. For example, daily mental logic and reasoning (analogical thinking, hypothesis, and inference) allow a person to go beyond the literal meaning of words and grasp implicit content in a situation

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative cognitive-linguistic methodology, applying conceptual metaphor theory to analyze French literary and idiomatic data. Associative and inferential analyses were also used to explore how zoomorphic meanings are constructed and perceived. Primary mechanisms such as metaphorical modeling, cognitive projection, and categorization are investigated using examples from authentic French texts.

RESULTS

Animal images become stable in the mind when shaped by cultural and historical factors. Human observations of animal behavior form the experiential basis for cognitive models, metaphors, and associations that link specific animals to certain meanings. In turn, these

images are reinforced through conceptual mapping and categorization processes, integrating them into the individual's worldview. For instance, through metaphorical projection, features of an animal can be transferred to a human or other object, making abstract or complex concepts more comprehensible. Animal images often reflect culturally transmitted stereotypes or values, acquired by categorizing and mapping these images onto conceptual structures. This study investigates the key cognitive processes involved in forming zoo-symbolic imagery, with examples drawn from French. In particular, we analyze metaphorical modeling, cognitive projection, associative linking, and inferential reasoning, exploring how each contributes to the creation of animal-based metaphorical expressions. By examining these mechanisms, we aim to shed light on the semantic and conceptual properties of animal imagery in language, as well as the broader interplay between cognition and linguistic representation.

Metaphorical modeling involves making implicit parallels between an animal and a concept alongside the explicit content of an expression. In other words, an animal metaphor brings out parallel meanings that are not directly stated. Such model systems are often deeply rooted in a culture's history and worldview. In French examples, animal features are frequently transferred to humans or objects through zoomorphic metaphors and similes, thereby aiding the understanding of complex ideas or emotional states. For instance, likening someone to a lion in French not only evokes the idea of strength but also taps into historical and cultural associations of nobility and courage. *Comme un serpent qui roule et déroule ses anneaux pour se rendre compte à lui-même de sa force, elle enveloppait d'avance Felton dans les mille replis de son inventive imagination (AD)* : the coiled motion of the serpent metaphorically describes the woman's mental manipulation. Such models illustrate parallel meanings and serve as cultural universals anchored in metaphorical cognition (Chudinov, 2003; Fedeneva, 2000).

Cognitive projection enables the human mind to reinterpret external phenomena by mapping internal conceptual structures—such as emotions, psychological states, or moral judgments—onto concrete or familiar entities (Kolmogorova, 2020). In the sentence *"Ou bien il me semblait être gardé par mon feu débonnaire [...] comme par un chien de berger actif, fidèle et diligent"* (Exupéry), the warmth and presence of a fireplace are reimagined through the projection of a loyal sheepdog. This zoomorphic metaphor transforms a passive object into an active agent of protection and emotional comfort, encoding

symbolic values such as fidelity and security within a domestic setting.

A similar mechanism of cognitive projection is observed in Victor Hugo's expression *"Sur le premier gobelet on lisait cette inscription : vin de singe, sur le deuxième : vin de lion, sur le troisième : vin de mouton, sur le quatrième : vin de cochon. Ces quatre légendes exprimaient les quatre degrés que descend l'ivrogne : la première ivresse, celle qui égaye ; la deuxième, celle qui irrite ; la troisième, celle qui hébète ; la dernière enfin, celle qui abrutit"*. Here, progressive stages of drunkenness are not merely described but are projected onto a sequence of animal archetypes: the monkey (symbolizing cheerfulness and mischief), the lion (courage or aggression), the sheep (docility or conformity), and the pig (excess and moral degeneration). This sequence metaphorically recasts human behavioral changes into an animalistic taxonomy, allowing readers to cognitively access abstract psychological transformations through concrete, culturally loaded animal images. Each stage involves a semantic reconfiguration of the human subject via animal symbolism, reinforcing how cognitive projection shapes meaning in metaphor-rich discourse.

Association is not merely a mental image linked to a real object, but rather a specific stimulus that initiates a chain of cognitive processes. Associative activity activates emotional memory (visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic impressions) and imagination, drawing upon vivid traces of past individual experience. The spoken or perceived form of a linguistic unit triggers an entire network of images and concepts in the mind, forming what is known as the associative field of a concept [Plakhotnaya, 2021]. The formation of zoomorphic metaphors is grounded in associations between human and animal imagery. Such associations, both universal and culturally specific, expand the semantic scope of the metaphor: *"Un excepté pourtant. C'était un visage fin, intelligent, rusé, une espèce de museau de singe et de diplomate"* (Victor Hugo).

An emotional zoomorphic association refers to the metaphorical transference of affective states, cultural value judgments, and behavior patterns typical of animals onto a person or situation. This process is rooted in anthropocentric cognition, where the appearance, behavior, and symbolic meanings of animals serve to reflect human emotions and internal states [Silinskaya, 2015]. For example, in the sentence *"Montparnasse avait l'attitude humiliée et furieuse d'un loup qui serait happé par un mouton"* (Victor Hugo), the wolf – traditionally a symbol of pride, strength, and independence – is associated with the

emotional experience of humiliation and anger resulting from being overcome by a sheep, a symbol of weakness. This semantic shift projects the psychological torment of the character onto a culturally loaded animal figure, generating emotional dissonance in the reader by juxtaposing conflicting affective signals.

As a cognitive mechanism, inference (or inferential reasoning) is one of the key processes contributing to the formation of meaning. It enables individuals to move beyond the purely denotative meanings of linguistic units and access meanings that lie outside their immediate semantic boundaries. Inference is grounded in everyday logical reasoning, which, although not directly tied to formal processes of proof, relies on a rational mode of thought. It includes such cognitive operations as analogical reasoning, hypothesis generation, assumption-making, and drawing conclusions based on prior experience [Serova, 2007].

In the case of zoomorphic expressions, interpretation often requires the identification of implicit connections between human characteristics and animal traits. This mechanism encourages the recipient to seek meaning beyond the literal level and engage in interpretive reasoning. For instance, in the phrase "il recula jusqu'à la ruelle, comme il eût fait à l'approche d'un serpent qui eût rampé vers lui" (AD), the serpent carries symbolic connotations of danger, fear, and threat. The individual withdraws not simply out of instinct, but because he cognitively equates the threat at hand to the approach of a snake. The reader infers the presence of fear and perceived peril through the emotional associations evoked by the image of the serpent.

Likewise, in "Comme le sanglier, donnant le coup de boutoir et renversant tout ce qui se trouve devant lui, la colonne s'élança alors dans la rue et culbuta tout ce qu'elle trouva devant elle" (Dumas), the military column is likened to a wild boar, a powerful animal known for its frontal attacks. Although the text does not explicitly describe the column's force or destructiveness, the metaphor of the boar delivering a "coup de boutoir" – a violent forward thrust with its tusks – allows the reader to infer the column's overwhelming power. Thus, inference bridges the gap between symbolic imagery and conceptual understanding, drawing on prior knowledge and emotional response to generate meaning.

In the cognitive approach, categorization is a fundamental mechanism that bridges cognitive processes and language, serving as a basis for understanding the structure of both thought and communication [Zhuravlyov, 2017]. Categorization

plays an active role in the process of conceptualization, enabling the grouping of objects based on shared features and the formation of stable semantic fields. This mechanism is clearly evident in the expression of zoomorphic units, as animals are frequently interpreted as cognitive symbols representing particular traits or behavioral models.

For example, the lion is conceptualized as a symbol of power and authority, while the fox becomes an emblem of cunning and trickery. These associations are the result of categorization, reinforcing cognitive models and cultural stereotypes linked to specific animals. In the phrase "Et il continua son chemin ... avec la sagacité du renard flairant une compagnie de perdrix" (Victor Hugo), the human subject is portrayed through the image of a fox, representing someone intelligent and vigilant—a reflection of the category of intellect and alertness. Similarly, in "Ils sont insoucients et indolents comme des chats. Le bas peuple des provinces est remuant, celui de Paris ne l'est pas" (Victor Hugo), the lower classes of Paris are categorized as being carefree and indifferent, much like cats – living on their own terms without concern. This expression illustrates how social behavior is mapped onto an animal image to define a specific human group.

Moreover, the representation of zoomorphic units varies across cultural frameworks, revealing the link between categorization and cultural conceptual landscapes. For instance, while the owl is a symbol of wisdom in European culture, in Uzbek culture it may connote misfortune or destruction. This highlights the fact that categorization is not a static process, but a dynamic system that evolves under the influence of both cognitive mechanisms and cultural traditions.

DISCUSSION

The analysis shows that metaphor, projection, association, inference, and categorization are interrelated mechanisms that collectively shape zoomorphic imagery. These processes enrich animal metaphors with semantic depth and emotional resonance, reflecting cultural perceptions and cognitive universals. Through this lens, French expressions convey abstract human experiences such as fear, cunning, loyalty, and intoxication using animal metaphors that are grounded in shared cultural narratives (Silinskaya, 2015; Dybo & Nikulenko, 2019).

CONCLUSION

In the course of this research, the formation of zoosymbolic units has been analyzed through the lens of core cognitive mechanisms—namely metaphorical modeling, projection, association, inference, and categorization—illustrated through concrete examples. These mechanisms not only facilitate the

linguistic representation of animal imagery, but also play a crucial role in enriching such representations with cultural and conceptual meaning. Zoomorphic expressions, grounded in human experience and cultural stereotypes, contribute to semantic depth and psychological resonance. In the French language, zoometaphors serve as tools for expressing emotional states, value judgments, social positions, and cultural values. The findings of this study underscore the intrinsic connection between language and cognition, offering a theoretical foundation for further cross-cultural comparative research.

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