

## Symbolic Animals and Cultural Cognition: Selective Trait Symbolization in Tamil Animal Metaphors

**Arulmani A.S.**

Research Scholar

Department of Linguistics

Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai

arul360z@gmail.com

Mobile: 9563660006.

**Dr. K. Umaraj**

Associate Professor and Head

Department of Linguistics

Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai

**Dr. A. Subramanian**

Senior Professor (Rtd.)

University of Benghazi, Libya

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### Abstract

Animal metaphors are among the most enduring and cognitively productive resources of human language. Despite considerable scholarship in conceptual metaphor theory, Tamil has remained comparatively understudied with respect to its rich figurative tradition. The present article investigates Tamil animal metaphors through an interdisciplinary framework integrating cognitive linguistics, ethnolinguistics, folklore studies, and cultural semiotics. The central theoretical contribution of the study is the concept of selective trait symbolization—the cognitive and cultural process through which specific animal characteristics are isolated from broader zoological identity and generalized into symbolic models for interpreting human behaviour, emotion, and social relations. Complementary concepts introduced include symbolic zoology, perceptual salience, and narrative stabilization. Drawing on data from Tamil proverbs, colloquial speech, oral discourse,

and folk narratives, the analysis examines three major symbolic domains: sensory metaphorization (e.g., *kaḷugu pārvai*, "eagle vision"), behavioural symbolization (e.g., *kuṛaṅgu sēṭṭai*, "monkey mischief"; *narittaṅam*, "fox-like cunningness"), and moral-emotional symbolization (e.g., *mudalai kaṅṅīr*, "crocodile tears"; *pasuttōl pōrttiya puli*, "a tiger disguised in cowhide"). The findings demonstrate that metaphorical animality is fundamentally a cultural construct shaped by perceptual salience, ecological familiarity, narrative repetition, and ideological valuation rather than by zoological representation. Implications for cross-cultural metaphor theory and the cognitive linguistics of understudied languages are discussed.

**Keywords:** animal metaphor; Tamil; conceptual metaphor theory; selective trait symbolization; cultural cognition; symbolic zoology; narrative stabilization; Dravidian linguistics

## 1. Introduction

Animal metaphors constitute one of the most enduring and cognitively productive features of human language. Across cultures, speakers routinely invoke animals to conceptualize human behaviour, emotion, morality, intelligence, and social identity. Expressions such as *sly as a fox*, *wolf in sheep's clothing*, or *crocodile tears* illustrate how animal imagery functions not merely as ornamental rhetoric but as a condensed system of cultural cognition through which societies interpret and evaluate human experience. Within contemporary cognitive linguistics, metaphor is no longer regarded as a peripheral literary device; rather, it is understood as a fundamental mechanism of conceptual organization whereby abstract domains are structured through more concrete and experientially accessible source domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff & Turner, 1989; Kövecses, 2010). Animal metaphors occupy a particularly significant position within this framework because they emerge at the intersection of embodied perception, ecological familiarity, folklore, and collective social memory.

Although metaphor studies have expanded substantially over the last four decades, scholarly attention has concentrated predominantly on Indo-European and East Asian languages, especially English, Chinese, Spanish, and Arabic (Deignan, 2003; Kövecses, 2005; Yu, 1998). Comparatively little research has examined metaphor formation in Dravidian languages, particularly Tamil, despite Tamil's extensive literary antiquity, rich oral traditions, and highly

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elaborated figurative culture. Existing studies involving Tamil animal expressions have largely remained descriptive, lexicographical, or folkloristic in orientation, focusing primarily on proverb collection or semantic documentation rather than on the cognitive and cultural mechanisms underlying metaphorical selection. Consequently, fundamental explanatory questions remain insufficiently explored: Why do particular animals become symbolically productive within Tamil discourse? How are specific behavioural, sensory, or emotional traits abstracted from animals and mapped onto human social life? Through what cultural processes do these symbolic meanings acquire semantic stability across generations?

The present study addresses these questions through an investigation of animal metaphors in Tamil discourse from the perspective of *selective trait symbolization* and cultural cognition. The study argues that animal metaphors do not emerge through total representation of animals as biological entities. Rather, metaphor formation operates through the selective abstraction of culturally salient traits—such as cunningness, vigilance, gentleness, deception, conformity, or restlessness—which are subsequently generalized into symbolic models for interpreting human behaviour and social relations. The metaphorical fox is not a zoological fox in its entirety, nor is the symbolic monkey reducible to biological primate behaviour. Instead, specific perceptually or narratively intensified traits become cognitively isolated and culturally stabilized within discourse.

The study further proposes that animal metaphors participate in broader systems of cultural cognition. Human societies do not merely observe animals; they culturally reconstruct them into symbolic categories that function as cognitive shortcuts for social interpretation. Through repeated circulation in folktales, proverbs, oral narratives, ritual discourse, and everyday speech, certain animals gradually acquire stable symbolic personalities. The fox becomes the embodiment of cunning intelligence, the sheep symbolizes conformity, the crocodile signifies emotional hypocrisy, and the cow represents harmless gentleness. These symbolic identities persist not because of zoological precision but because they remain culturally memorable, emotionally resonant, and socially functional.

The present analysis situates Tamil animal metaphors within a broader cognitive-cultural framework integrating conceptual metaphor theory, ethnolinguistics, folklore studies, and

discourse analysis. Particular attention is given to the role of perceptual salience, ecological embeddedness, and narrative stabilization in the production and preservation of metaphorical meanings. Rather than merely cataloguing metaphorical expressions, the study seeks to explain the mechanisms through which metaphorical animality becomes culturally intelligible and semantically durable.

The study is guided by four research questions:

- (1) Which sensory, behavioural, emotional, and moral traits are selectively foregrounded in Tamil animal metaphors?
- (2) What cognitive and cultural mechanisms explain the metaphorical productivity of specific animals within Tamil discourse?
- (3) How do folklore, oral tradition, and narrative repetition contribute to the stabilization of symbolic animal identities?
- (4) In what ways do animal metaphors function as instruments of social cognition and moral evaluation?

To address these questions, the study adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodology grounded in cognitive linguistics and ethnolinguistic analysis. Data are drawn from Tamil proverbs, colloquial speech, oral discourse, folk narratives, and culturally stabilized idiomatic expressions.

The article contributes to contemporary metaphor research in three significant ways. First, it extends cognitive linguistic approaches to an understudied Dravidian language context. Second, it proposes selective trait symbolization as an explanatory mechanism for metaphorical selection. Third, it demonstrates that metaphorical animality is fundamentally a cultural and cognitive construct shaped by narrative memory, ecological familiarity, and social interpretation rather than by zoological representation alone.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

The present study examines Tamil animal metaphors through an interdisciplinary theoretical framework integrating cognitive linguistics, cultural cognition, ethnolinguistics,

folklore studies, and semiotic analysis. While conceptual metaphor theory provides the foundational insight that metaphor structures human cognition, the present analysis argues that animal metaphor formation cannot be adequately explained through source–target mapping alone. The symbolic productivity of particular animals emerges through a more complex interaction involving perceptual salience, ecological familiarity, cultural valuation, narrative repetition, and social applicability. Accordingly, the study advances four interconnected theoretical concepts: (1) selective trait symbolization, (2) symbolic zoology, (3) perceptual salience, and (4) narrative stabilization.

## 2.1 Metaphor as Cultural Cognition

Conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) established that metaphor is not merely linguistic ornamentation but a cognitive mechanism through which abstract experience becomes intelligible. Human beings routinely conceptualize emotion, morality, intelligence, social hierarchy, and interpersonal relations through more concrete experiential domains. Animal metaphors exemplify this process by transforming zoological perception into symbolic social interpretation.

However, metaphorical cognition is never entirely universal or culturally neutral. Sharifian (2011) argues that metaphorical meanings emerge within *cultural conceptualizations* shared by communities rather than existing solely as individual cognitive structures. Animal metaphors therefore function simultaneously as cognitive mappings and as culturally stabilized symbolic models (see also Croft & Cruse, 2004; Kövecses, 2015; Sharifian, 2017). Within Tamil discourse, expressions such as *narittaṇam* ('fox-like cunningness'), *kuraṅgu sēṭṭai* ('monkey mischief'), and *mudalai kaṇṇīr* ('crocodile tears') do not merely describe observable animal traits; they classify human conduct within culturally intelligible moral frameworks.

## 2.2 Selective Trait Symbolization

The central theoretical concept proposed in the present study is *selective trait symbolization*. This refers to the cognitive and cultural process through which specific animal traits are isolated from broader zoological existence and subsequently generalized into metaphorical models for interpreting human behaviour, emotion, and social relations. Selective trait

symbolization operates through four interrelated processes: perceptual identification, cultural amplification, narrative circulation, and metaphorical stabilization. The resulting metaphorical animal is therefore not a biological organism in its entirety but a culturally compressed symbolic construct.

### **2.3 Symbolic Zoology**

The study introduces the concept of *symbolic zoology* to distinguish between biological animals and their culturally reconstructed metaphorical counterparts. Within symbolic zoology, animals cease to function merely as biological entities and instead become carriers of moral, emotional, ideological, and behavioural symbolism. The notion draws partially upon Lévi-Strauss's (1963) observation that animals are "good to think with" and upon Barthes's (1972) theory of myth, which shows how metaphorical animal meanings often acquire the appearance of natural truth through repeated cultural circulation. Importantly, symbolic zoology does not require scientific accuracy: many metaphorical animal associations persist despite contradictory zoological evidence.

### **2.4 Perceptual Salience and Embodied Experience**

Certain animals become metaphorically productive because they generate vivid sensory or emotional impressions within human experience. This principle aligns with cognitive linguistic theories emphasizing embodiment and experiential cognition (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Perceptual salience operates across visual, auditory, behavioural, tactile, and emotional domains. However, perceptual salience alone is insufficient for metaphorical stabilization: animals become symbolically powerful when perceptual vividness combines with cultural circulation and interpretive utility.

### **2.5 Narrative Stabilization**

*Narrative stabilization* refers to the process through which metaphorical meanings survive via long-term narrative circulation rather than solely through direct ecological observation. Ong's (1982) work on orality demonstrates that oral cultures preserve knowledge through repetition and formulaic structures; animal metaphors benefit significantly from such repetition. Narrative stabilization involves three major stages: repeated symbolic association, collective mnemonic

reinforcement, and semantic naturalization. Over time, metaphorical meanings become detached from their original narrative contexts and circulate as stable cultural categories (Trim, 2011).

### **3. Methodology**

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and cognitively oriented methodology. Because the study is concerned not merely with lexical meaning but with symbolic abstraction, cultural cognition, and metaphorical stabilization, a purely quantitative approach would be insufficient for capturing the layered social and semiotic dimensions of the data. The analysis combines methods from cognitive linguistics, ethnolinguistics, discourse analysis, folklore studies, and interpretive semiotics.

#### **3.1 Data Sources**

Data were collected from multiple interrelated sources: Tamil proverbs and proverbial expressions; colloquial spoken Tamil; oral discourse and conversational usage; folk narratives and storytelling traditions; idiomatic expressions in everyday communication; literary and semi-literary cultural references; and political and social commentary. The study prioritizes culturally stabilized expressions that are widely intelligible within Tamil-speaking communities.

#### **3.2 Data Classification**

For analytical clarity, collected animal metaphors were classified into three broad symbolic categories. Sensory trait symbolization encompasses metaphors emphasizing perceptual capacities such as vision, hearing, and tactile experience. Behavioural trait symbolization covers metaphors derived from movement patterns, social behaviour, and behavioural tendencies. Moral and emotional symbolization includes metaphors involving emotional authenticity, ethical evaluation, and concealed aggression. Although analytically distinguished, these categories frequently overlap, and the classification functions as a heuristic framework rather than a rigid taxonomy.

#### **3.3 Analytical Procedure**

The analysis proceeded through four stages: (1) identification of animal metaphors from collected discourse materials grouped according to recurrent symbolic patterns; (2) trait isolation identifying the culturally foregrounded characteristic; (3) cultural interpretation examining moral

evaluation, ideological implication, emotional resonance, social applicability, and ecological familiarity; and (4) examination of narrative and symbolic stabilization through folklore, repetition, and oral transmission.

### 3.4 Limitations

Several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. The study is qualitative rather than corpus-statistical and does not provide frequency-based analysis of metaphor usage across large datasets. Because the data are culturally selected rather than randomly sampled, the study prioritizes symbolic significance over representational exhaustiveness. Regional and dialectal variations within Tamil metaphor usage are not systematically examined. Nevertheless, the qualitative approach remains appropriate for the explanatory objectives of the study.

## 4. Behavioural Trait Symbolization

Behavioural trait symbolization constitutes one of the most productive mechanisms in Tamil animal metaphor formation. The analysis demonstrates that behavioural metaphors emerge not through complete zoological representation but through selective behavioural abstraction: particular behavioural tendencies become cognitively isolated, culturally amplified, and socially generalized, while other biological characteristics remain symbolically irrelevant. The resulting metaphorical animal functions as a condensed behavioural model embedded within collective cultural cognition.

### 4.1 Restlessness and Playful Disorder: *kuraṅgu sēṭṭai*

The expression *kuraṅgu sēṭṭai* ('monkey mischief') symbolizes restlessness, impulsiveness, playful disruption, and uncontrolled activity. The metaphor derives from widely observable monkey behaviour—rapid movement, climbing, imitation, object grabbing, vocal excitement, and unpredictable bodily activity—which creates strong perceptual salience because these features appear dynamic, expressive, and anthropomorphic. Within Tamil discourse, the expression applies to children behaving uncontrollably, individuals interfering unnecessarily in social situations, chaotic group activity, or playful but disruptive behaviour. The metaphor foregrounds behavioural instability while ignoring biological characteristics such as social hierarchy, grooming, or ecological adaptation, exemplifying selective trait symbolization.

## 4.2 Strategic Deception and Cunningness: *narittaṇam*

The expression *narittaṇam* ('fox-like cunningness') symbolizes strategic intelligence, manipulative cleverness, and deceptive calculation. The fox's stable symbolic position across numerous linguistic traditions does not emerge from objective zoological verification of superior intelligence but through long-term narrative stabilization in folktales and oral traditions. In Tamil discourse, the expression appears in contexts involving political manipulation, interpersonal deceit, hidden strategy, or socially calculated behaviour. The metaphor functions simultaneously as behavioural description and moral evaluation: tactical intelligence employed for deceptive or self-serving purposes is critiqued rather than merely named.

## 4.3 Persistence and Tenacious Attachment: *uṭumbu piṭi*

The expression *uṭumbu piṭi* ('monitor-lizard grip') symbolizes persistence, tenacious attachment, stubbornness, and refusal to relinquish control. The metaphor derives from the culturally perceived gripping strength of the monitor lizard. Whether this folk perception corresponds fully to zoological reality is secondary to the metaphor's symbolic effectiveness: the bodily image of strong gripping is tactilely vivid, emotionally memorable, and socially interpretable. The metaphor demonstrates how physical interaction becomes psychologically generalized; a tactile bodily action—gripping—is metaphorically transferred into social and emotional persistence.

## 4.4 Evasiveness and Social Slipperiness: *naḷuvura mīṇu*

The expression *naḷuvura mīṇu* ('slippery fish') symbolizes evasiveness, unpredictability, and difficulty of social control. Unlike metaphors based primarily upon visual observation, this expression derives partly from embodied tactile experience: the fish becomes metaphorically productive because physical attempts to grasp it often result in escape or instability. Within Tamil discourse, the metaphor commonly refers to individuals who avoid accountability, evade direct response, manipulate situations indirectly, or resist social containment. The expression contains implicit social criticism: behavioural unpredictability becomes morally suspect when interpreted as intentional evasion.

## 4.5 Conformity and Collective Passivity: *semmari āṭṭu kūṭṭam*

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The expression *semmaṛi āṭṭu kūṭṭam* ('sheep herd mentality') symbolizes blind conformity, passive following, and absence of independent judgment, deriving from collective herd movement. The metaphor functions primarily as ideological and social criticism: individuals or groups are symbolically downgraded through comparison with herd animals because the expression implicitly valorizes independent thought and individual agency. The metaphor reveals the ideological dimension of behavioural symbolization: animal metaphors frequently participate in cultural systems valuing autonomy and strategic agency while criticizing passive social submission.

## 5. Sensory Trait Symbolization

Sensory trait symbolization constitutes another major mechanism in Tamil animal metaphor formation. The analysis demonstrates that sensory metaphors emerge through selective abstraction of a single perceptual quality from the broader biological identity of the animal. Animals associated with striking sensory capacities—whether real, exaggerated, or folklorically imagined—become symbolically productive within discourse.

### 5.1 Visual Sharpness and Perceptual Vigilance: *kaḷugu pārvai*

The expression *kaḷugu pārvai* ('eagle vision') symbolizes exceptional visual acuity, heightened attentiveness, and perceptual precision. The eagle becomes metaphorically productive because of its culturally perceived visual superiority: elevated flight, distant observation, and predatory targeting create a powerful sensory image of perceptual mastery. The metaphor may apply to teachers identifying errors quickly, political observers recognizing hidden motives, investigators noticing overlooked evidence, or individuals demonstrating unusual attentiveness. The expression foregrounds vision selectively while ignoring other zoological features such as predatory aggression or territoriality, and reflects broader cultural valuation of vigilance and foresight as markers of intelligence and authority.

### 5.2 Selective Hearing and Strategic Inattention: *pāmbu kātu*

The expression *pāmbu kātu* ('snake ears') frequently carries ironic or critical connotations, referring to selective hearing, deliberate inattention, or strategic refusal to respond. The expression appears zoologically paradoxical because snakes do not possess externally visible ears and are not conventionally associated with auditory superiority. Metaphorical effectiveness here depends not

upon scientific precision but upon cultural dramatization: the snake's broader symbolic identity within South Asian cultural imagination—stealth, silence, unpredictability, concealed presence—allows it to become a symbolic model for strategic social non-responsiveness. The metaphor reveals that perception itself becomes morally evaluable: selective hearing is interpreted not as neutral sensory limitation but as socially strategic behaviour.

### **5.3 Auditory Aesthetics: Crow–Cuckoo Contrasts**

Tamil discourse contains sensory metaphors involving sound quality and vocal aesthetics. The proverbial contrast expressed in *kākkāyā katturā? kuyilā kūvurā?* ('Is it cawing like a crow or singing like a cuckoo?') illustrates the process. The crow symbolizes harshness and discordant expression, whereas the cuckoo symbolizes sweetness and melodic beauty. Through this opposition, vocal sound becomes metaphorically transformed into a framework for evaluating human speech, communicative refinement, and social aesthetic judgment. Pleasant speech suggests emotional refinement and interpersonal grace, while discordant expression may symbolize aggression or social insensitivity.

### **5.4 Tactility and Embodied Sensory Experience**

Certain Tamil animal metaphors derive not from visual or auditory perception but from tactile interaction, supporting cognitive linguistic theories emphasizing embodiment (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The slippery fish and the monitor-lizard grip demonstrate how physical contact becomes generalized into social cognition. Tactility therefore functions not merely as physical sensation but as a foundation for symbolic cognition, with the suggestion that tactile metaphors frequently possess strong emotional immediacy because they derive from direct bodily experience.

## **6. Moral and Emotional Symbolization**

Moral and emotional symbolization constitutes a third major domain in Tamil animal metaphor formation. Unlike behavioural metaphors that primarily classify action patterns, and sensory metaphors that foreground perceptual capacities, moral-emotional metaphors evaluate ethical disposition, emotional authenticity, interpersonal trustworthiness, and concealed intention. These metaphors are among the most ideologically charged forms of symbolic animality.

## 6.1 Emotional Hypocrisy and Feigned Sorrow: *mudalai kaṇṇīr*

The expression *mudalai kaṇṇīr* ('crocodile tears') symbolizes insincere emotional display, feigned sympathy, and manipulative expressions of grief. The symbolic power derives from the dramatic opposition between outward emotional display and concealed predatory intention. The crocodile becomes metaphorically productive not because of scientifically verified emotional behaviour but because cultural imagination constructs the animal as simultaneously tearful and dangerous. Within Tamil discourse the metaphor frequently appears in contexts involving political performance, strategic public sympathy, interpersonal manipulation, or institutional hypocrisy. The expression functions as moral accusation rather than neutral description: to describe someone's emotion as crocodile tears is to delegitimize the authenticity of that emotional expression.

## 6.2 Gentleness and Harmless Moral Disposition: *guṇattil pasu*

The expression *guṇattil pasu* ('cow-like gentleness') symbolizes harmlessness, patience, softness of temperament, and moral innocence. The symbolic cow derives much of its metaphorical force from South Asian religious and cultural traditions in which cattle occupy a morally elevated position associated with nurturing, non-violence, and maternal care. However, the analysis indicates that this expression may also carry latent ambivalence depending upon social context: excessive gentleness can imply passivity, vulnerability, or inability to defend one's interests effectively. In competitive or hierarchical situations, cow-like harmlessness may be interpreted as social weakness rather than moral strength. This ambivalence demonstrates that moral-emotional metaphors are rarely semantically fixed in purely positive or negative terms.

## 6.3 Concealed Aggression and Moral Disguise: *pasuttōl pōrttiya puli*

The expression *pasuttōl pōrttiya puli* ('a tiger disguised in cowhide') represents one of the most complex forms of moral metaphorization in the data. The metaphor symbolizes concealed aggression, hidden predatory intention, and deceptive moral presentation, combining two contrasting symbolic animals: the cow (representing gentleness and innocence) and the tiger (representing aggression, power, and predatory dominance). This symbolic opposition generates moral tension between appearance and reality. The metaphor frequently appears in contexts involving political deception, manipulative leadership, interpersonal betrayal, or concealed social

aggression, and demonstrates the combinatory capacity of symbolic zoology: multiple symbolic animals may interact within a single metaphorical structure, producing layered moral interpretation through contrastive symbolism.

#### **6.4 Contrastive Organization and Emotional Authenticity**

A recurring pattern across Tamil moral-emotional metaphors is contrastive organization. Symbolic meaning frequently emerges through opposition rather than isolated attribution—sincerity versus deception, gentleness versus aggression, innocence versus manipulation. This contrastive structure intensifies symbolic clarity and suggests that Tamil moral cognition frequently operates through symbolic binaries. Additionally, several moral-emotional metaphors specifically target discrepancies between inner emotional state and outward performance, reflecting broader social concerns involving trust, interpersonal reliability, public morality, and emotional sincerity.

### **7. Narrative Stabilization and Cultural Memory**

One of the most significant findings of the present study is that animal metaphors do not emerge solely through direct observation of animal behaviour. Metaphorical meanings acquire durability and cultural authority through long-term narrative circulation. Folktales, proverbs, oral storytelling, ritual discourse, literary traditions, and everyday conversation repeatedly reproduce symbolic animal identities until those identities become semantically naturalized within collective social cognition.

#### **7.1 Folklore and the Production of Symbolic Animals**

Folklore constitutes one of the primary mechanisms through which symbolic animal identities are culturally produced and transmitted. Tamil oral traditions contain numerous examples: folktales, village narratives, children's stories, and proverbial discourse repeatedly associate particular animals with culturally intensified traits. These symbolic identities emerge not through scientific observation but through narrative simplification and symbolic repetition. Folklore selectively exaggerates certain behavioural or emotional characteristics while suppressing others in order to produce culturally intelligible symbolic types. The symbolic animal

differs fundamentally from the zoological animal: the metaphorical fox is not a biologically complete mammal but a narratively stabilized embodiment of strategic deception.

## **7.2 Repetition, Naturalization, and Cultural Memory**

Narrative stabilization depends fundamentally upon repetition. Symbolic meanings become culturally authoritative when they recur consistently across multiple discourse contexts and generations. Repeated exposure gradually produces semantic naturalization: speakers cease to perceive symbolic meaning as interpretively constructed and instead experience it as self-evident cultural knowledge. Cultural memory—socially distributed and repeatedly reinforced through ritual, discourse, performance, and institutional repetition—plays a particularly important role in preserving moral and emotional metaphors. Animal metaphors therefore function not merely as linguistic artefacts but as mnemonic instruments through which cultures preserve social knowledge and moral interpretation.

## **7.3 Ecological Familiarity and Narrative Availability**

Although narrative stabilization allows symbolic meanings to survive independently of direct ecological experience, the initial emergence of metaphorical productivity remains closely tied to ecological familiarity. Animals occupying visible positions within everyday environmental life—historically, cattle, snakes, monkeys, goats, fish, crows, eagles, and predatory animals within Tamil agrarian and village environments—are more likely to become narratively available and metaphorically productive because their behaviour is culturally recognizable and perceptually memorable. The findings suggest that ecological intimacy and narrative circulation operate together: direct sensory familiarity increases narrative reproducibility, while narrative repetition preserves symbolic meaning beyond immediate ecological experience (Fill & Penz, 2018).

## **7.4 Cultural Truth versus Zoological Truth**

A significant implication of narrative stabilization concerns the distinction between zoological truth and cultural truth. Many metaphorical animal identities persist despite lacking scientific accuracy: crocodiles do not literally cry from emotional hypocrisy; sheep are not inherently incapable of independent thought; snakes are not uniquely associated with selective hearing. Yet these associations remain culturally persuasive because narrative authority often

outweighs empirical zoological precision within systems of social cognition. This process aligns with Barthes's (1972) theory of myth: culturally constructed meanings become naturalized through ideological repetition, and the symbolic animal therefore belongs primarily to the domain of cultural truth rather than scientific representation.

## **8. Discussion**

The present study investigated Tamil animal metaphors through the interconnected concepts of selective trait symbolization, symbolic zoology, perceptual salience, and narrative stabilization. The findings reveal that Tamil animal metaphors function as highly compressed systems of cultural cognition through which societies interpret behaviour, evaluate morality, classify emotion, and organize social understanding. Metaphorical animals are not merely decorative linguistic devices but culturally stabilized symbolic constructs embedded within narrative memory, ecological experience, and collective interpretation.

### **8.1 Selective Symbolic Abstractions**

One central finding is that metaphorical animality operates through selective symbolic abstraction rather than total representational transfer. The symbolic productivity of an animal depends not upon complete behavioural correspondence but upon culturally intensified trait selection satisfying several conditions simultaneously: perceptual vividness, emotional memorability, ecological familiarity, narrative reproducibility, and ideological usefulness. Animal metaphors therefore reflect organized systems of symbolic prioritization rather than arbitrary linguistic convention.

### **8.2 Embodied Cognition and Cultural Mediation**

The findings align strongly with cognitive linguistic theories emphasizing embodiment (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980): human beings conceptualize abstract social phenomena through bodily experience and perceptual engagement with ecological surroundings. At the same time, the analysis extends embodiment theory by emphasizing the mediating role of cultural cognition—sensory experience becomes metaphorically productive through collective interpretation rather than through bodily perception alone. Perceptual salience is a necessary but not sufficient condition for metaphorical productivity.

### **8.3 Animal Metaphors as Social Cognition and Ideological Regulation**

Across all symbolic categories, the findings consistently demonstrate that animal metaphors function as mechanisms of social cognition, enabling speakers to evaluate behaviour, classify morality, interpret emotion, encode ideology, and negotiate social relationships. Through compact symbolic forms, complex social judgments become rapidly communicable. Animal metaphors also participate in ideological regulation: certain traits become culturally valorized (vigilance, independence, sincerity, strategic intelligence, emotional restraint) while others become symbolically downgraded (conformity, impulsiveness, deception, excessive passivity, emotional performance) (Charteris-Black, 2004).

### **8.4 Implications for Metaphor Theory**

The present study contributes to metaphor research in several important ways. First, it extends cognitive linguistic approaches into a relatively understudied Dravidian language context. Second, it shifts analytical emphasis from descriptive cataloguing toward explanatory mechanisms. Third, the concepts of selective trait symbolization and symbolic zoology provide analytical tools applicable beyond Tamil to other metaphorical systems involving plants, objects, natural phenomena, or social archetypes. Finally, the findings demonstrate that metaphor cannot be understood purely as linguistic mapping: metaphorical systems emerge through interaction among embodiment, ecology, narrative repetition, collective memory, ideology, and cultural cognition.

### **8.5 Limitations and Future Directions**

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study focuses primarily on culturally stabilized metaphors rather than highly creative metaphorical innovation, and the interpretive rather than corpus-statistical approach does not provide frequency-based analysis. Regional and dialectal variations within Tamil metaphor usage, caste-based usage patterns, gender differences, and generational shifts in metaphor interpretation are not systematically examined. Future research may extend the present framework through comparative cross-linguistic analysis, corpus-based metaphor studies, ecological linguistics, computational metaphor analysis, multimodal metaphor analysis (Forceville & Urios-Aparisi, 2009), discourse studies, and ethnographic approaches—

particularly investigation into how animal metaphors evolve under conditions of urbanization, media transformation, and changing ecological relationships.

## 9. Conclusion

The present article has examined Tamil animal metaphors through an integrated cognitive-cultural framework, proposing selective trait symbolization as an explanatory mechanism for understanding metaphorical productivity in a Dravidian language context. The analysis demonstrates that animal metaphors emerge through culturally organized processes in which selectively foregrounded sensory, behavioural, emotional, and moral traits are symbolically abstracted and mapped onto human social experience. The metaphorical animals inhabiting Tamil discourse are not zoological entities transferred unchanged into language but culturally reconstructed symbolic beings shaped by centuries of perception, storytelling, emotional valuation, and collective cognition.

Narrative stabilization and ecological familiarity work in concert to produce symbolic animal identities that persist across generations even as direct ecological interaction diminishes. The resulting symbolic zoology—a semiotic rather than biological system of animal meaning—provides speakers with highly economical cognitive tools for interpreting morality, emotion, behaviour, and social order. Understanding these mechanisms enriches metaphor theory by foregrounding the inseparability of language, ecology, folklore, and cultural memory in the constitution of meaning.

To study animal metaphors is consequently to study how human communities symbolically interpret themselves through the imaginative reconstruction of the natural world.

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