



The Perception of Pet-Animals as Metaphors in Japanese and Hindi Proverbs: A Cross-Cultural Analysis

Mohammad Jawed Ahmed

Center for Japanese Studies

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Email: mm.zafar23@gmail.com

Abstract: This study examines pet-animal metaphors in Japanese and Hindi proverbs to explore how animals such as dogs, cats, horses, and donkeys symbolise human traits such as wisdom, loyalty, strength, foolishness, etc. in proverbs. Through the application of Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Embodied Cognition, the study compares over 200 proverbs from both cultures. The study reveals the distinct similarities and differences in the metaphoric use of animals from both these cultures. For instance, the study found that while both cultures associate cats as a metaphor for intelligence, Hindi proverbs often show intelligence nourished with upbringing, whereas Japanese proverbs emphasise humility in intelligence. In addition, the study highlights the cultural significance of animal metaphors and their role in shaping societal values and worldviews.

Keywords: Proverbs, Metaphors, Pet animals, CMT, Embodied Cognition

Introduction: Pet-animal metaphors in proverbs offer a fascinating window into how societies convey human characteristics through the familiar traits of animals across cultures. Like every culture, in Japanese and Indian cultural traditions, these metaphors are not merely decorative elements of language; they serve as compact vehicles of collective wisdom and moral guidance. Proverbs are defined as concise expressions that contain shared truths that often employ metaphors to bridge the gap between abstract human qualities and the world of animals living in our surroundings (Mieder, 2004).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphors are simple and physical cultural concepts which bridge our personal experiences with the culture we live in. They play an important role in



understanding the phenomena occurring in our culture by “experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003:5).

In examining pet-animal metaphors within proverbs, it is observed that the common depictions of animals such as dogs, cats, and birds are deeply intertwined with cultural perceptions of wisdom, loyalty, strength, and even foolishness. For example, Japanese proverbs may employ a horse as a metaphor for a foolish man, while a Hindi proverb may portray a horse as a wise and strong animal. These nuanced representations offer a rich field for comparison, revealing how each culture’s unique historical, social, and ethical contexts shape its language and worldview.

This study seeks to explore how pet-animal metaphors such as dog, cat, cow, horse, and donkey¹ in proverbs reflect distinct cultural attitudes in Japan and India and how they are perceived in both these countries. The analysis will highlight how the same animal may embody differing characteristics in each culture by comparing proverbs that

feature common animals mentioned above. The objective is to uncover the similarities and dissimilarities in the portrayal of pet animals, thereby shedding light on the underlying cultural values and worldviews that shape these metaphorical expressions in both these countries.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs the following theoretical frameworks to analyse the metaphorical use of pet animals in Japanese and Hindi proverbs and to highlight the similarities and differences in how each culture perceives and uses these metaphors.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have proposed Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) theory, a framework for understanding how abstract concepts are systematically structured through concrete, embodied experiences. CMT suggests that metaphors are not merely linguistic elements but fundamental cognitive mechanisms that shape how we perceive and reason about the world. In the context of this study, CMT will be employed to explore how pet

¹ Proverbs related to donkeys have been found in large numbers in the Hindi Proverbs. Unfortunately, in Japanese context, the proverbs related to donkeys were not found due to the fact that donkeys rarely find their places in Japanese folktales and popular culture. As clear from the data, Horses in Japanese are used as a substitute for donkeys having both negative and positive connotation which is different

from India in a way that in Indian context, horses are often viewed as wise animals of high value and on the contrary donkeys are perceived as foolish animals, and occupies a lower place in animal hierarchy.

Therefore, the study has handled horses and donkeys separately in the data for Hindi proverbs.



animals function as concrete vehicles for representing abstract human traits. The study also employs Gibbs's (2006) theory of Embodied Cognition, which views that our cognitive processes are deeply rooted in our physical interactions with the world, shaping how we conceptualise and express abstract ideas. This framework suggests that the metaphorical associations of animals are not arbitrary but emerge from our embodied experiences with their physical traits and behaviours. In the context of Japanese and Indian proverbs, the symbolic representations of pet animals are profoundly influenced by culturally specific human, and animal interactions and the observable characteristics of these animals.

By integrating these three approaches, this study aims to uncover the cognitive and cultural basis that shapes the perception of pet-animal metaphors.

Literature Review

There are a number of studies which have been conducted for cultural examination of Japanese proverbs in comparison with other cultures. Al Hakimi (2024) analysed the relation between animal vocabulary in Japanese proverbs and the Japanese psychology. She analysed 15 proverbs and found that natural elements such as fish,

horses, birds, cats, and monkeys are used as symbols to express complex ideas about human behaviour and moral values in challenging situations. More recently, Arfianty and Pakpahan (2023) examined proverbs by comparing them with similar Indonesian proverbs. They analysed 22 Japanese and Indonesian proverbs and concluded that many animal symbols carry similar meanings in both cultures. Some differences in their depiction reflect unique cultural knowledge and local traditions.

Pan and He (2023) studied how people in China and Japan employ proverbs related to cattle. They concluded that Chinese cattle proverbs are more common, diverse, and widely used compared to those in Japan. This difference is due to China's long history of cattle farming, the strong connection between cattle and agriculture, and the presence of myths and legends about cattle in Chinese folktales. In contrast, Japan historically prioritised fishing over agriculture, and cattle were mainly used for transportation and meat rather than farming. This cultural difference influenced the number and significance of cattle-related proverbs in both countries.

Pettersson (2021) examines how animals are used as metaphors in English and Japanese idioms. The study examines how



animal traits serve as a source to describe human characteristics. In both languages, it was observed that idioms often highlight specific animal behaviours to emphasise human traits. Cultural factors influence the use of animals in portraying the different human characteristics. This cultural influence was particularly noticeable in Japanese idioms.

These studies have been conducted with Japanese proverbs compared to Chinese, English and Indonesian perspectives to mention a few. However, there is little or no research in this area from the perspective of Hindi Proverbs.

Methodology

The study employs descriptive qualitative methodology. It uses a corpus of over 200 pet animal proverbs from each language collected from dictionaries. Hindi proverbs have been collected from “A Dictionary of Hindustani Proverbs” published in 1998, and for Japanese Proverbs, the data has been taken from “Japanese Proverbs: Wit and Wisdom” published in 2012. The selection of proverbs is based on the presence of pet animals and their metaphorical significance. In addition, only those proverbs have been taken into account which are commonly used in today’s day-to-day conversations. The

collected proverbs have been categorised based on attributes such as intelligence, power, respect, loyalty, innocence, holiness, cleanliness, inferiority, foolishness, trickery, neutrality, and misfortune.

For analysing these proverbs, Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) will be applied to identify systematic metaphorical mappings between animals and human characteristics. Embodied Cognition will be employed to provide insight into how human experiences with these animals influence their metaphorical meanings. A cross-cultural comparison will be conducted to identify commonalities and differences in metaphorical representations.

Results and Discussion

As per the data, the frequency of dogs, cats, cows and donkeys has appeared the following times in Japanese and Hindi proverbs.

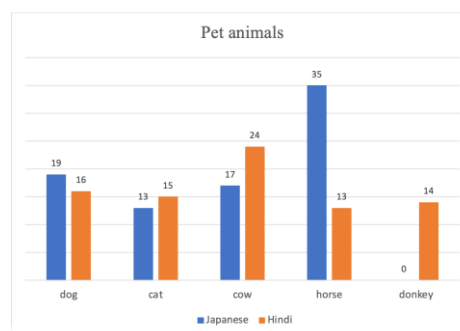




Fig 1: Frequency of Pet animals appearing in Japanese and Hindi Proverbs

The collected Japanese and Hindi proverbs about the said pet animals were then analysed according to the traits and themes they represent (see Methodology section). For simplification of the data, these traits were further classified into simple categories such as positive, negative, and neutral symbolism as illustrated in the following figures.

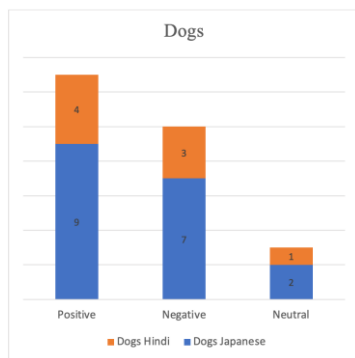


Fig 2: Perception of Dogs

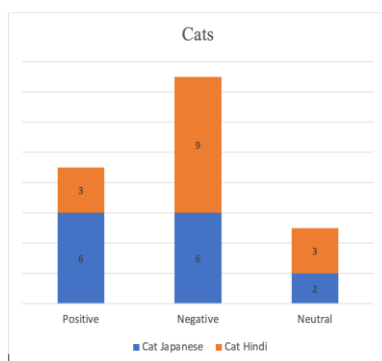


Fig 3: Perception of Cats

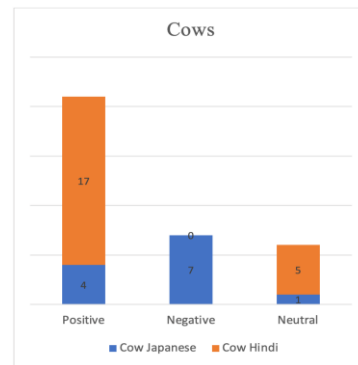


Fig 4: Perception of Cows

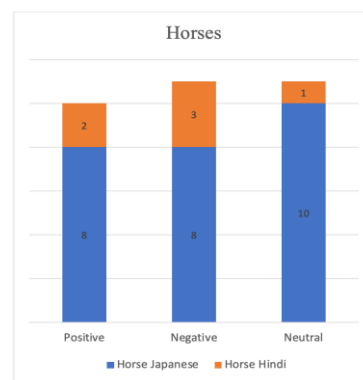


Fig 5: Perception of Horses

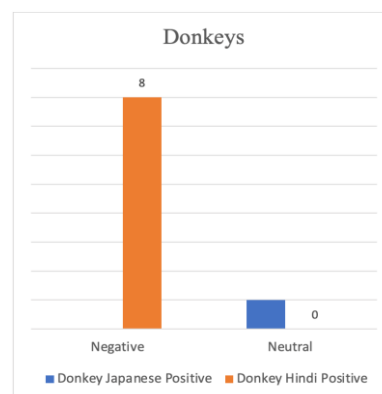


Fig 6: Perception of Donkeys

Based on the data, the following observations were made with regard to the themes pointed out in the methodology



section. The study concluded that valued traits such as wisdom and intelligence have been associated to only a few animals in both Japanese and Hindi proverbs. In both cultures, cats and dogs have been portrayed as intelligent creatures. For example, in Hindi, the proverb “पढ़े घर की पढ़ी बिल्ली” (a cat raised in an educated home is also learned) implies that knowledge is acquired from the surrounding environment. In Japan, the proverb “上手の猫が爪を隠す” (a skilled cat hides its claws) suggests that truly intelligent people do not flaunt their abilities. In contrast, Hindi proverbs like “कुत्ता भी दुम हिला कर जगह साफ़ कर लेता है” (even a dog cleans its place by wagging its tail) employ that even dogs are intelligent enough to feel to do what is necessary. This highlights the idea of intelligence being used practically in daily life, enabling one to understand and fulfil basic needs. This shows that while Japanese culture may associate wisdom with humility and restraint, Hindi culture often links it to practical cleverness.

While in both languages, cats and dogs have been depicted as intelligent creatures, there are differences in the way animals symbolise wisdom in both cultures. Although horses are rarely portrayed as

intelligent in Japanese proverbs, but their appearances can only be seen in some nuanced dynamics of wisdom. In the proverb “老いたる馬は道を忘れず” (an old horse never forgets the way) signifies experience and the wisdom gained over time. Therefore, it can be concluded that the importance of experience and upbringing in developing intelligence is emphasised in both cultures.

In addition, horses and dogs, apart from being a symbol of intelligent creatures, are also perceived as loyal animals in both cultures. For example, in Indian proverbs “आएगा कुत्ता तो पाएगा टुकड़ा” (the dog will come and receive its share) indicates that loyalty is earned through service. Similarly, in Japanese proverbs such as “犬馬の労” (labour of a dog and horse) and “犬馬の心” (heart of a dog and horse) portrays loyalty by working hard and emotionally involved for the master.

Both Japanese and Hindi proverbs use pet-animal metaphors to depict foolishness and ignorance. The Japanese proverb “馬の耳に念仏” (Buddhist prayers in a horse’s ear) and its Hindi equivalent “भैंस के आगे बीन बजाना”² (to play the flute in front of a

² Buffalo is outside the scope of the study. In this study, it is used as a mere reference.



buffalo) have the same indirect communicative significance in both cultures. However, a horse is not considered a foolish animal, instead, a similar looking animal, a donkey is associated with foolishness in the Indian context.

The concept of stubbornness is also shared between the two languages. In Japanese, “犬兎の争い” (a fight between a dog and a rabbit) signifies meaningless disputes, whereas in Hindi the proverb “खिसियानी बिल्ली खंभा नोचे” (a frustrated cat scratches the pillar) indicates irrationality. Both cultures teach avoiding foolishness and accept the outcome no matter what, however, through different ways. The Japanese proverb suggests not to engage in pointless disputes that benefit others, whereas the Hindi proverb makes us cautious for acting irrationally out of frustration. These differences highlight Japan’s strategic approach to conflict, and India’s focus on self-control and personal conduct.

The representation of power and strength, and other dynamics of power, varies across both cultures. In Japanese, “窮鼠猫を噛む” (a cornered mouse bites the cat) conveys that even the weak can retaliate when pushed to the limit. Similarly, Hindi culture expresses

resilience through “अल्लाह मेहरबान तो गधा पहलवान” (if God is merciful, even a donkey can become a wrestler), emphasising divine intervention in achieving power. While both cultures acknowledge unexpected strength in adversity, the Japanese proverb emphasises individual reaction, while the Hindi proverb attributes it to fate or divine will. Japanese proverbs such as “名馬に癖あり” (a famous horse has its quirks) acknowledge that even strong individuals have flaws. Similarly, Hindi proverbs about power and higher qualities are often associated with the horse. For example, in the proverb “गधा घोड़ा एक भाव!” (a donkey and a horse are not comparable), which implies that in Indian conditions, a horse is considered a high value sophisticated animal. On the other hand, a horse is generally considered a symbol of power in the Japanese context, though it is sometimes taken as a metaphor for an ignorant fool as stated above.

Regarding animals that are respected and honoured, pet animals such as cows are deeply honoured in Hindi culture. Proverbs such as “गाय का दूध, सो माँ का दूध” (a cow’s milk is like a mother’s milk) show the sacred status of the cow, associating it with nourishment and motherhood. Japanese



culture, on the other hand, does not attribute the same religious reverence to animals.

Both cultures use cats to signify trickery and deception. The Japanese proverb “猫に鯉節” (leaving bonito flakes with a cat) conveys the danger of leaving temptation within easy reach, much like the Hindi proverb “बिल्ली और दूध की रखवाली?” (a cat guarding milk?). These proverbs highlight universal scepticism towards those with a history of cunningness. However, Japanese proverbs often frame deception as a strategic move, as seen in “飼い犬に手を噛まれる” (a pet dog bites the owner’s hand), which implies betrayal by someone trusted. Hindi proverbs, on the other hand, frequently use trickery as a moral lesson, such as “मेरी बिल्ली मुझसे ही म्याऊं” (my own cat meows at me), emphasising ungratefulness.

Social hierarchy is an important theme in both cultures. The Japanese proverb “猫も杓子も” (even a cat and a rice scoop) expresses inclusivity, meaning everyone, regardless of status, is involved in something. In Hindi, “गधा धोने से बछड़ा नहीं हो जाता” (a donkey does not become a calf by being washed) conveys that social status cannot be altered easily. While both proverbs acknowledge hierarchy, the

Japanese one has a more inclusive connotation, whereas the Hindi one stresses rigidity. Similarly, the Japanese proverb “牛は牛連れ、馬は馬連れ” (cows stay with cows, horses stay with horses) and its Hindi counterpart “जहाँ गाय, वहाँ गाय का बच्चा” (where there is a cow, there will be a calf) both highlight the idea that people associate with their own kind. This reflects how both cultures recognise social stratification and the tendency for people to stay within their social groups.

While many Japanese and Hindi proverbs use animals to convey wisdom, foolishness, and power, some proverbs employ animals in a neutral way, without explicitly associating them with any positive or negative connotations. These proverbs often use animals to illustrate natural tendencies, universal truths, and social behaviours without judgment.

For example, “犬が西向きや尾は東” (if a dog faces west, its tail will be in the east) is a factual statement rather than a metaphor, emphasising the inevitability of certain outcomes. Similarly, the Hindi proverb “गाय को अपने सींग भारी नहीं” (a cow does not find its horns heavy) simply acknowledges how beings adapt to their natural features, without attributing wisdom or foolishness to the cow.



Some proverbs highlight general life principles. The Japanese proverb “馬には乗ってみよ人には添うてみよ” (ride a horse to understand it, live with a person to know them), while the Hindi proverb “घोड़ा घास से दोस्ती करेगा तो खाएगा क्या?” (what will a horse eat, if it befriends the grass) both stress experiential understanding and natural necessities. Likewise,

“馬を水辺に連れて行くことはできるが水を飲ませることはできない” (you can take a horse to water, but you can't make it drink) conveys a universally accepted truth about agency and free will.

Other proverbs use animals to describe inevitable occurrences. “बिल्ली गई, चूहों की बन आई” (when the cat is away, the mice thrive) and “暗闇の猫は皆灰色” (in darkness, all cats are grey) both indicate natural consequences without attaching any moral weight. Similarly, “गधे को गधा खुजाता है” (a donkey scratches another donkey) neutrally observes how beings of similar nature tend to help each other.

These neutral animal proverbs demonstrate how both Japanese and Hindi cultures recognise the roles of animals in everyday life beyond metaphorical morality. They highlight simple truths, inevitabilities, and

social behaviours, showing that animals are not always symbols but also part of natural observations.

Conclusion

This study on animal metaphors in Japanese and Hindi proverbs reveals both striking similarities and notable differences between the two cultures in how they perceive and symbolise animals. Both languages see cats, dogs, and horses as wise. Similarly, dogs and horses are perceived as loyal creatures in both cultures. In addition, power is associated with horses in both countries. The key difference lies in the moral framing of proverbs. Hindi proverbs often describe ethical lessons and social critique by integrating religious values in the proverbs. On the contrary, Japanese proverbs tend to emphasise practicality, restraint, and strategic thinking for expressing indirect communication through animals in proverbs.

The analysis reveals both shared and distinct cultural perspectives. The reverence for cows in Hindi proverbs, contrasted with their neutral role in Japanese culture, also highlights the religious and societal differences between the two cultures. Despite these variations, the use of animals in proverbs across both



cultures illustrates the universal human tendency to draw wisdom from nature and everyday life.

By comparing Japanese and Indian proverbs, the study aids scholars in linguistics, folklore, and translation studies in better understanding the role of metaphor in intercultural communication. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how cultural perceptions shape the metaphorical use of animals in language.

For future studies, a large data set with a wide range of pet animals and wild animals can be taken into account to draw comparison between these two cultures to have a more precise conclusion.

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