



Metaphors in Lexicon: Animal Attributes as Idioms in Japanese



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Abstract

This study explores the types of animal lexicon used as idioms to express the metaphorical meanings. The Japanese language contains a rich array of metaphors that reflect the speaker's cultural perspectives and values. The data were collected from Japanese news articles from *asahi.com* and analyzed using the conceptual metaphor theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson, with the addition of Knowles and Moon. Based on the results, there are 9 types of animals: *neko* 'cat', *inu* 'dog', *mushi* 'insect', *uma* 'horse', *zako* 'small fish', *suzume* 'sparrow', *ushi* 'cow', *sakana* 'fish', and *tori* 'bird'. These types of idioms are commonly used to convey characteristics, states, or situations. The usage of animal lexicon to convey metaphorical meanings may appear as compounds or phrases. The metaphorical meanings are ontological, structural, conventional, spatial, and creative.

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1 Introduction

Language plays an essential role in everyday communication, acting as a tool for conveying messages between people. The way language is used in communication is closely tied to the surrounding context, often shaped by the speaker's cultural background. This type of figurative language, known as metaphor, involves comparing two concepts based on perceived similarity or closeness in meaning (Keraf, 2007). Metaphor is not merely a linguistic expression used in daily life, but it also permeates our actions and thoughts. Metaphors reflected in everyday language are expressed through various forms (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008).

Metaphors or figurative language are often found in idioms. Idioms are language units (which can be words, phrases, or sentences) whose meanings cannot be predicted from the lexical meanings of their components or the grammatical meanings of those units (Chaer, 2009). An idiom has a construction whose meaning is not the same as the combined meanings of its parts, and it is a distinctive form of language or dialect that characterizes a particular nation, ethnic group, community, and so on (Kridalaksana, 2013).

The Japanese language contains a rich variety of idioms. In Japanese, idioms are called *kanyouku*, which are formed from various types of words, including those derived from body parts, natural objects, colors, senses of taste, numbers, animals, and plants (Sutedi, 2011). One factor contributing to the use of certain animal metaphors is the familiarity or cultural prominence of the animals in Japanese society. For example, dogs, cats, and insects are not only commonly found but also widely kept as pets in Japan. In this context, natural lexicons acquire metaphorical meanings due to the conceptual resemblance between the natural element and the intended meaning. These metaphors often function to describe human traits, behaviors, or emotions in culturally resonant ways. These idioms often carry metaphorical meanings that are culturally understood by native speakers (Dobrzyńska, 1995).

The presence of animal metaphors is widespread across many languages, including Japanese. Animal names—such as those of *inu* 'dogs', *neko* 'cats', and *mushi* 'insects'—commonly appear in Japanese everyday conversation. For example, the lexicon *mushi* 'insect' combines with the adjective *yowai* 'weak' to form the compound word *yowamushi*, which is used to describe someone who is cowardly or lacks courage. Similarly, the lexicon *inu* 'dog' can be combined with the verb *makeru* 'to lose' to create the compound word *makeinu*, which metaphorically refers to a 'loser' or someone who has failed at something. When translating an idiom is not all the words translated through their lexical meaning, because the lexical meaning is the actual meaning or the original meaning of the word. If learners do not understand idioms in their daily use in Japanese society, fluent communication will be difficult to realize (Gapur et al., 2019).

This study analyzes forms and meanings of animal lexicons in Japanese idioms, particularly those used to describe human characteristics. These expressions may appear in the form of individual words, compounds, phrases, or sentences. The focus of this research is on animal lexicons that are metaphorically used in Japanese idioms. This study adopts a semantic approach, supported by a metaphorical meanings perspective (Gibbs Jr et al., 2004).

Research on Japanese metaphors has been previously conducted. Al Hakimi's (2024) study titled "Animal Conceptual Metaphors in *Kotowaza*: A Cognitive Linguistic Study" examines the cognitive linguistic perspective of Japanese culture about animal-related *kotowaza* (Japanese proverbs). The theory used in analyzing the data is semantic theory, according to Sutedi, and metaphor theory by Lakoff and Johnson. Based on the results of the analysis, there are 15 *kotowaza* that incorporate animal elements. The *kotowaza* results in distinct animal species, specifically: red snapper, shrimp, horse, bird, fish, cat, bird, monkey, and fish. Furthermore, in terms of meaning, the use of animals in *kotowaza* is employed to depict an individual's inherent qualities or traits, and can also be utilized to express specific circumstances or settings.

Meidariani & Nurita (2021), in their research titled "*Leksikon Biotik dan Abiotik Bahasa Jepang sebagai Metafora Kecantikan Gadis Jepang*", analyze the use of Japanese biotic and abiotic eco-lexicons through an ecolinguistic approach. The study focuses on metaphors related to the beauty of Japanese women, examining lexicons that reflect the natural environment from a Japanese cultural perspective. The analysis identified four biotic and three abiotic lexicons used metaphorically to describe female beauty. For instance, *Fuji*, an abiotic lexicon referring to Mount Fuji, appears in the expression *Fuji hitai*, which highlights the elegance of a Japanese woman's forehead and hairstyle, likened to the shape of Mount Fuji. As for biotic lexicons, *karasu* 'crow' is used to represent the beauty of Japanese women's black hair, drawing on the association with the crow's deep black feathers (Hamdi, 2022).

Research by Al Hakimi and Meidariani both analyzes the meaning of metaphors in the Japanese language lexicon. The difference lies in the scope and type of data of the lexicon. Fitriana only looks at the animal lexicon in

the forms of *kotowaza*, while Meidariani looks at the biotic and abiotic eco-lexicons, both having metaphorical meanings for Japanese women's beauty. This research tries to complement it by analyzing the various forms with animal lexicon, which has a metaphorical meaning.

2 Materials and Methods

This research is qualitative, producing descriptive data in the form of written words or sentences that can be observed. The data source comes from newspaper articles uploaded on the *asahi.com* site. This site is part of the Asahi Shimbun, one of Japan's national newspapers published since 1874 until now. The data of this research are in the form of sentences containing the usage of animal lexicon found in the sentence or compound word. By using this method, the data were observed and then recorded for further analysis.

After the data was collected, the next step was to perform data analysis. The method used in data analysis was the identity method because it refers to the reality designated or referred to by language (Sudaryanto, 2015). In this case, the animal lexicon is used to express a person's characteristics in everyday Japanese life. This method was accompanied by an advanced technique, namely the technique of sorting out based on the determining elements. This research uses conceptual metaphor theory, according to Lakoff & Johnson (2008), with the addition of Knowles & Moon (2004).

Conceptual metaphor is a metaphor used as a device in individual cognition to construct a conceptual system by transferring one concept to another. Conceptual metaphors are divided into three categories: 1) structural metaphors, 2) orientational metaphors, and 3) ontological metaphors. Structural metaphor is a concept formed metaphorically through the use of other concepts. Structural metaphors can also be defined as translating abstract concepts into concrete concepts. Orientational metaphors are metaphors related to space and place, which can be determined through human physical experience. This metaphor begins with the fact that humans have bodies that can function in a physical environment. An ontological metaphor is a metaphor that transforms an event, activity, idea, or emotion into an entity. The ontological metaphor consists of several aspects, namely: referring, quantifying, identifying, setting goals, and motivating action (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008).

There are also types of metaphor: 1) conventional metaphor, a metaphor that has lost its figurative impact due to frequent use in everyday language. Its meaning is generally fixed and does not require inference from the speaker or interpretation by the listener. Because this expression is commonly used, its metaphorical meaning is easily understood without extra effort; and 2) creative metaphor, a metaphor requires interpretation through implication and connotation. Its meaning is broad and varies depending on the speaker's social and cultural background. Creative metaphors are often found in literary works like poetry, novels, and songs to create artistic or emotional effects (Knowles & Moon, 2004).

After the data was analyzed, the last step was presenting the results of the analysis. The method used was the formal and informal method. The formal method is a method that describes the results of the analysis in a table, while the informal method describes in ordinary words (Sudaryanto, 2015).

3 Results and Discussions

Based on the results of the analysis, eight animal lexicons were found to be used to express the person's characteristics, state, and situation from the *asahi.com* site, which are: which are: *neko* 'cat', *inu* 'dog', *mushi* 'insect', *uma* 'horse', *suzume* 'sparrow', *ushi* 'cow', *sakana* 'fish', and *tori* 'bird'. In terms of meaning, the used animal lexicon is a kind of conventional, structural, ontological, and spatial metaphor. Here are the lists of the animal lexicon used to express characteristics in Japanese:

Table 1
List of Japanese Animal Lexicon Used in Idioms

No.	Animal Lexicon	Idioms	Meanings
1	猫 <i>Neko</i> 'cat'	猫舌 <i>Nekojita</i>	Sensitive
2	犬 <i>Inu</i> 'dog'	負け犬 <i>Makeinu</i>	Loser
3	馬 <i>Uma</i> 'horse'	野次馬 <i>Yajiuma</i>	Onlooker

No.	Animal Lexicon	Idioms	Meanings
4	雑魚 <i>Zako</i> 'small fish'	雑魚キャラ <i>Zakokyara</i>	Minor character
5	虫 <i>Mushi</i> 'insect'	虫の息 <i>Mushi no iki</i>	On the verge of dying
6	雀 <i>Suzume</i> 'sparrow'	雀の涙 <i>Suzume no namida</i>	Something insignificant
7	牛 <i>Ushi</i> 'cow'	牛の歩み <i>Ushi no ayumi</i>	Slow pace
8	魚 <i>Sakana</i> 'fish'	水を得た魚のように <i>Mizu o eta sakana no yō ni</i>	Thriving or acting freely in a favorable environment
9	鳥 <i>Tori</i> 'bird'	鳥のように自由に <i>Tori no yō ni jiyū ni</i>	To be unrestricted, unbound, able to move or act freely

(1) 猫舌の私が飲みやすい温度に冷めるまで、小一時間かかる。

Nekojita no watashi ga nomiyasui ondo ni sameru made, koichijikan kakaru.

'It takes about an hour for the drink to cool down to a comfortable temperature for me, who has a **sensitive tongue**.'

(Asahi, 2025)

In data (1), *nekojita* is a combination of the *neko* 'cat' with *shita* 'tongue'. *Nekojita* means 'cat's tongue' and is used to express the character of someone whose tongue is sensitive to hot or cold food. The meaning of this metaphor comes from cats whose tongues are sensitive to hot food. When someone has difficulty eating hot or cold food, it can be said to have a cat's tongue. The compound word *nekojita* carries the meaning of a conventional metaphor, which is a type of metaphor commonly used in daily life, thus becoming part of the language and culture. The word *neko* ('cat') has long been used in the Japanese language compared to other languages around the world. This is inseparable from the history and culture of Japanese society, which considers cats as bringers of good fortune. In popular culture—such as comics, animation, films, and so on—cat characters are frequently featured. As a result, Japanese people are very familiar with the appearance and characteristics of cats (Ariestafari, 2017). Therefore, the combination of the lexemes *neko* 'cat' and *shita* 'tongue' in the compound *nekojita* is used because Japanese people are well aware of the characteristic of cats having sensitive tongues.

(2) いまだに過労死した人を負け犬のように扱い、冷たい視線を向ける人たちさえいます。

Imadani karōshi shita hito o makeinu no yō ni atsukai, tsumetai shisen o mukeru hitotachi sae imasu.

'There are still people who treat those who die from overwork as **losers** and look upon them coldly.'

(Asahi, 2025)

In data (2), the verb *makeru* 'lose' can be combined with the noun *inu* 'dog' to become a compound *makeinu*. *Makeinu* expresses the nature of the Japanese as losers. In this case, it's like a dog having different characteristics from its pack, or it has lost a fight. This lexicon was used in the mid-2000s to denote a loser. In the 21st century, this lexicon is also addressed to women in their 30s who are unmarried and childless (Michel, 2020). The idiom *makeinu* is a type of structural metaphor. This idiom uses the structure of a concrete concept, which is a dog that is lost in a fight, to describe a person who is considered a failure. In this case, the animal lexicon *inu* 'dog' is associated with "someone who is looked down upon".

(3) 野次馬のような人たちが一瞬留飲を下げる、判決死刑を「勝ち負け」で判断するかのよ
うな風潮には共感できません。

Yajiuma no yōna hito-tachi ga issun Tome in o sageru, hanketsu shikei o `kachimake' de handan suru ka no yōna fūchō ni wa kyōkan dekimasen.

'I cannot sympathize with the trend of **onlookers** feeling a momentary sigh of relief and judging the death penalty as a matter of "winning or losing."

(Asahi, 2025)

Data (3) contains the compound word *yajiuma*, which is formed from the noun *yaji* 'jeering' and the animal lexicon *uma* 'horse'. When combined, the word *yajiuma* means 'onlooker'. This usage of the animal lexicon comes from horse traits that sometimes just stare at something. When used to describe a person's trait, it means the person is stretching

his or her neck or just staring at something because it gets really into whatever they are looking at. The words *yajiuma* ‘onlooker’ suggest that those gathering around a distressing scene are motivated not by genuine concern but only by curiosity and a desire for vicarious thrills (Hayashi, 2019). The idiom *yajiuma* is a kind of ontological metaphor that involves understanding abstract experiences or social behaviors as if they were objects or entities. In this case, comparing a curious person to a horse reacting to a noisy scene is instinctive behavior.

(4) この青年はシステムによって使い捨てされる、利潤追求ゲームの雑魚キャラに過ぎない

Kono seinen wa shisutemu ni yotte tsukaisute sa reru, rijun tsuikyū gēmu no zakokyara ni suginai.

‘This young man is nothing more than a **minor character** in a profit-seeking game, disposable by the system.’

(Asahi, 2025)

Data (4) contains the usage of the compound word *zakokyara*, which is a combination of animal lexicon *zako* ‘small fish’ and noun *kyara* ‘character’. *Zakokyara* has the literal meanings of ‘small fish character’, but metaphorically it has the meaning of minor characters that appear in games, anime, and other works who are relatively weak and easily defeated. The idiom *zakokyara* is a type of creative metaphor; a metaphor requires interpretation through implication and connotation. It’s often found in literary works. In this case, it likens weak characters to small, insignificant fish, implying they’re unimportant and easily defeated.

(5) 大学進学で京都に住んでからは蒸し暑い夏場は虫の息だった。

Daigaku shingaku de Kyōto ni sunde kara wa mushiatsui natsuba wa mushi no iki datta.

‘After I moved to Kyoto to attend university, I was **barely hanging on** during the hot and humid summers.’

(Asahi, 2025)

Data (5) contains the usage of the idiom that consists of the word *mushi*, which means ‘insect’, and *iki*, which means ‘breath’. When these two words are combined, they produce the lexical meaning ‘insect’s breath’ with the idiomatic meaning ‘near death or dying’. The use of the particle *no* serves to link two nouns, where the first noun modifies the following noun. This idiom conveys the condition of someone who is on the verge of collapse (Fitriana & Trahutami, 2019). The idiom *mushi no iki* is a type of ontological metaphor. In this case, the abstract state of being close to death is metaphorically conceptualized as having only the faint breath of an insect, which is weak.

(6) 残るお金は雀の涙だったが、コロナがさらに追い打ちをかけた。

Nokoru okane wa suzume no namida datta ga, korona ga sarani oiuchi o kaketa.

‘The money they had left was a **drop in the bucket**, but the coronavirus dealt an even heavier blow.’

(Asahi, 2025)

Data (6) contains the noun phrase *suzume no namida*, which literary means ‘sparrow’s tear’. This phrase contains the animal lexicon *suzume* ‘sparrow’. A sparrow is a type of bird that has a small body. The phrase *suzume no namida* refers to when a sparrow cries, its tears will be tiny (Michel, 2020). Therefore, metaphorically, this phrase means is something so insignificant with such a tiny impact might as well have not happened. The phrase *suzume no namida* is a type of ontological metaphor. In this idiom, the abstract concept of “insignificant amount” is represented by the tiny, barely visible tear of a sparrow.

(7) 10年ほど前から、国が男性に育児・家事を促すも、取得率向上は牛の歩み。

10-Nen hodo mae kara, -koku ga dansei ni ikuji kaji o unagasu mo, shutoku-ritsu kōjō wa ushi no ayumi.

‘For about 10 years now, the government has been encouraging men to take part in childcare and housework, but the rate of men taking leave has only increased at a **slow pace**.’

(Asahi, 2025)

Data (7) contains the phrase *ushi no ayumi*, which can be translated into ‘the movement of a cow’. The phrase *ushi no ayumi* has the idiomatic meaning of very slow progress or something that moves forward at an extremely slow pace. A cow walks very slowly because it has a large body and only eats and sleeps. Similarly, a person who works very slowly is compared to a cow (Retno, 2017). It is often used for processes like learning, improvement, or

development. The idiom *ushi no ayumi* is a type of structural metaphor, which equates abstract progress with the physical slowness of a cow's walk.

- (8) 原発は脱炭素でクリーンなエネルギーだと言って、国はいまや水を得た魚のように進んでいる。

Genpatsu wa datsu tanso de kurin'na enerugi da to itte, koku wa imaya mizu o eta sakana no yō ni susunde iru.

'By calling nuclear power a clean, carbon-free energy source, the government is now moving forward **like a fish in water.**'

(Asahi, 2025)

Data (8) contains the usage of animal lexicon *sakana* 'fish' in the sentence *mizu o eta sakana no yō ni*, which can be translated into 'like a fish that has found water'. The idiom *mizu o eta sakana no yō ni* is used to describe a person or group who is suddenly thriving or acting freely and effectively in a favorable environment. The idiom *mizu o eta sakana no yō ni* is a type of structural metaphor. In this idiom, the concept of thriving is structured in terms of a fish in water, which is its natural and ideal environment.

- (9) ビザがなくても、鳥のように自由に世界を往来できればいいな、との思いを込めました。

Biza ga nakute mo, tori no yō ni jiyū ni sekai o ikiki dekireba ī na, to no omoi o komemashita.

'It expresses my wish that we could travel the world **freely like birds**, even without a visa.'

(Asahi, 2025)

Data (9) contains the usage of animal lexicon *tori* 'bird' in the sentence *tori no yō ni jiyū ni*, which has the literal meanings of 'freely like a bird'. It has the idiomatic meaning of to be unrestricted, unbound, able to move or act freely in the context of travel, expression, or living. The metaphor *tori no yō ni jiyū ni* is a type of orientational metaphor because it is based on spatial orientation. In this case, birds fly in the sky, symbolizing freedom of movement and lack of physical or social restraint. The metaphor projects the vertical space by flying upward and outward onto the abstract concept of freedom.

4 Conclusion

Based on the results, the Japanese use several animal lexicons in expressing idioms. Eight types of animal lexicon can be used to express characteristics, states, or situations, which are: *neko* 'cat', *inu* 'dog', *mushi* 'insect', *uma* 'horse', *zako* 'small fish', *suzume* 'sparrow', *ushi* 'cow', *sakana* 'fish', and *tori* 'bird'. The concept of animal lexicon metaphors belongs to the ontological, conventional, structural, spatial, and creative metaphors. The expression of nature conceptualizes the experience and thoughts of Japanese people into real entities using natural objects that exist in Japan. The usage of the animal lexicon can be found in sentences, compound words, or phrases.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declared that they have no competing interests.

Statement of authorship

The authors have a responsibility for the conception and design of the study. The authors have approved the final article.

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