

A Semasiological Investigation into the Nature of Figurative Usage of Animal Names in Bengali

Niladri Sekhar Dash^{*}

Introduction

An attempt is made in this paper to examine a unique semasiological feature probably shared by all natural languages. Effort is also made here to investigate how Bengali people use figuratively animal names of different species and genus in their normal speech and writing to address their fellow people in various contexts of their linguistic interaction for achieving different ecolinguistic, sociocultural, cognitive, and communicative goals (Halliday 1990). It is observed that animal names are used quite frequently to address or to refer to human beings in different sociocultural situations to dehumanize or elevate an addressee's status in the context of an active discourse. This paper makes an attempt for understanding, with reference to a moderately large sentence database collected and analysed for this purpose, how usage of animal names come into play in the process of reference, communication, and expressing ideas about people. This study shows that the use of animal names in addressing a person not only reveals the attitude of the speaker towards the addressee, but also reflects on the mentality of the addresser as well as on several aspects of culture, life, living, habits, beliefs, rites, and rituals of the speech community to which those people belong. Thus, this study tries to reveal an interesting semantico-pragmatic interplay of a language and its society when people figuratively use animal names in their speech or writing. The findings obtained from this study may be extended further to study how natural fauna and flora of a particular geographical region can implicitly control the pattern of use of language by the members of a

^{*}Linguistic Research Unit, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata, India.

speech community, thereby attesting the importance of study of semasiology in the larger canvas of linguistics, ecolinguistics, and pragmatics (Makkai, 1993).

Early Works in this Area

Not much work has been done in this area in Indian languages, although a few studies have been made in some of the advanced languages. Nearly four decades ago, Craddick and Miller (1970) made a study to explore the nature of symbolic usage of animal metaphors in language to reflect on dubious nature of human cognition. Fraser (1979) studied the use of animal metaphors in language and their impact on human thought process, while Whaley and Antonelli (1983) studied how women are symbolically referred to as birds and beasts in literary texts, folk tales, idioms, and proverbs in Italian. It led Sutton (1995) to evaluate place and position of woman in contemporary German slang, which inspired Nesi (1995) to study the nature of bestiary with reference to figurative meanings of animal terms used in English. Hsieh (2002) studied how animal expressions in Mandarin Chinese and German are used differently based on the differences on cultural perspectives of the two speech communities. This led Hsieh and Lien (2004) to investigate compositionality of botanical concepts in languages with reference to the fixed expressions used in Mandarin Chinese and German plants.

In a recent study, Halupka-Resetar and Radic (2003) investigated how animal names are used for addressing people in Serbian. For this, they listed different animal names in their questionnaire covering a wide range of speakers for providing information of usages of animal names in regular linguistic interactions. Fernandez and Catalan (2003) made similar attempts to tracing the nature of semantic derogation in animal metaphors used in English and Spanish. They used a questionnaire for which 44 native English language speakers were selected as informants from Great Britain, Ireland, United States, and Canada.

The present study is similar to last two works, as the goal of this study is to investigate how the native Bengali speakers use animal names to refer to others and describe nature of others; and how usage of these expressions

serves as a strategy for expression of concepts a speaker wants to convey. The use of animal terms serves in another way: it not only reflects on the nature of an addressee, but also reflects on mental state, liking, disliking, love or hate of an addressor. Thus, the use of animal terms reflects on addressee, addressor, as well as on the ecolinguistic fabric of a speech community to which these people belong.

The Methodology

For this study, a survey was conducted with ten native Bengali male and female informants within the age group of 20-25, who study at colleges and universities in Bengal. They come from almost same socio-cultural background, use Bengali as first language, and are well-versed in English and Bengali. This helped us to elicit appropriate responses from informants with less amount of error.

The informants are requested to produce spontaneous Bengali sentences where names of various animals are used to address a person, describe a character, or refer to appearance of an individual. Each informant is asked to produce individually, without any assistance from others, 20 different sentences where there is no repetition of an animal name already mentioned earlier. That means an informant has to use the name of an animal once, although he or she can use many names of animals in the sentences. Thus, we elicited 200 sentences, in which some animal names are most frequently used, as the following table shows (Table 1).

Animal Name	Citation	Animal Name	Citation
chāgal 'goat'	11	goru 'cow'	10
gādhā 'donkey'	9	bandar 'monkey'	9
hāti 'elephant'	8	kukur 'dog'	8
ghoṛā 'horse'	7	murgi 'hen'	7
bāgh 'tiger'	6	balad 'bullock'	6
rāmchāgal 'ram'	6	śeyāl 'fox'	5
paṭhā 'he-goat'	5	śuyor 'pig'	5
bherā 'sheep'	5	keuṭe 'krait'	5
īdur 'rat'	4	muṣik 'mouse'	4

berāl 'cat'	4	hans 'duck'	4
-------------	---	-------------	---

Table 1: Animal Names and their Number of Uses in a Sample Bengali Sentence Database

It shows that animal names like *chāgal* 'goat' [11], *goru* 'cow' [10], *gādhā* 'donkey' [9], *bandar* 'monkey' [9], *kukur* 'dog' [8], *hāti* 'elephant' [8], *ghorā* 'horse' [7], *murgi* 'hen' [7], *bāgh* 'tiger' [6], *rāmchāgal* 'ram' [6], *balad* 'bullock' [6], *śeyāl* 'fox' [5], *paṭhā* 'he-goat' [5], *śuyor* 'pig' [5], *bherā* 'sheep' [5], *keṭe* 'krait' [5], etc. occur frequently in Bengali sentences produced by informants. Strikingly, the use of *gādhā* 'donkey' is very frequent in Bengali, although this animal does not come into the picture of ecological frame where Bengali people live. It is not a common animal in this geographical region like other animals of the list. Therefore, it is an open question to find how this animal name becomes so frequent in usage in the language even if it does not have prominent existence in the geographical location of the speech community.

Another important thing to be noted is that there are frequent use of several imaginary animal names like *rāngarur*, *hasjāru*, *kumṛopatās*, *bakacchap*, etc. which are not taken into consideration even though these are used frequently to refer to human beings in sentences. The logic behind their exclusion from the list is that these fictitious names do not have any physical realization in the actual world of life and living of the speech community. However, animal names written in English, such as, *pig*, *bitch*, *donkey*, *fox*, etc. are taken into study due to their existence in reality.

In many cases, informants have used idioms and proverbs containing animal names, such as, *basanter kokil*, *ṭākār kumir*, *rāghab boyāl*, *kalur balad*, *bak dhārmik*, *keṭer hāccā*, *kāl keṭe*, *poṣā maynā*, *śeyāl paṇḍit*, *tīrther kāk*, etc. Such expressions are hardly considered in the present study, since the usage of animal names in idiomatic and proverbial expressions in a language are usually fossilized, which asks for separate investigation. Given below are some example to show how animal names have occurred in sentences and how they directly or indirectly reflect on the life, language, and society of the Bengali language users.

- (1) (tor mato gādhā āmi ār ekṭā dekhini)
“I have never seen a donkey like you.”
- (2) (goru kothākār, erakambhābe keu kare!)
“What a cow, does anyone do like this!”
- (3) (oke ekṭā rāmchāgaler mato dekhte)
“He looks like a ram.”

Classification of Senses Denoted by the Terms

We wanted to investigate if animal names express affection or abuse. Examples given above show that these are normally used both in the sense of insult and appreciation. However, when these are used as vocatives, they more often express a kind of negative sense towards an addressee, although this negative sense is, sometimes, tinged with endearment. Based on this we classified the primary senses the animal names denote into following five types:

(a) **Sense of Affection or Endearment:** animal names, such as, *chāgal* ‘goat’, *goru* ‘cow’, *gādhā* ‘donkey’, *bandar* ‘monkey’, *balad* ‘bullock’, *rājans* ‘swan’, *prajāpati* ‘butterfly’, *hariṇ* ‘deer’, *pāyrā* ‘pigeon’, etc. denote a sense of affection or endearment. We have found that the first four most frequently used animal terms are exclusively used affectionately in the sense of endearment without having little tinge of abuse.

(b) **Sense of Insult or Abuse:** animal names like *rāmchāgal* ‘ram’, *bherā* ‘sheep’, *murgi* ‘hen’, *seyāl* ‘fox’, *paṭhā* ‘he-goat’, *īdur* ‘rat’, *khāsi* ‘castrated goat’, *hāti* ‘elephant’, *kāk* ‘crow’, *śakun* ‘vulture’, *gardhab* ‘ass’, *ulluk* ‘gibbon’, *chūco* ‘mouse’, *gaṇḍār* ‘rhino’, *girgiṭi* ‘chameleon’, *moṣ* ‘buffalo’, *kumir* ‘crocodile’, *ghughu* ‘dove’, *pūṭimāch* ‘a kind of fish’, *ṭikṭiki* ‘lizard’, *bādur* ‘bat’, *bhām* ‘civet’, *śāmuk* ‘snail’, *khaccar* ‘mule’, *maśā* ‘mosquito’, etc. denote a sense of insult or abuse.

(c) **Sense of Appreciation or Praise:** Animal names like *bāgh* ‘tiger’, *ghoṛā* ‘horse’, *siṃha* ‘lion’, *kaimāch* ‘anabas’, *boyāl* ‘boyal’, *citābāgh* ‘cheetah’, etc. denote a sense of appreciation or praise.

(d) **Sense of both Insult and Appreciation:** Animal names like *keute* 'krait', *hanumān* 'lemur', *berāl* 'cat', *kokil* 'cuckoo', etc. denote a sense of both insult and appreciation.

(e) **Neutral or Impartial Sense:** Animal names like *jirāph* 'giraffe', *uṭ* 'camel', *muṣik* 'mouse', *hans* 'duck', *bak* 'crane', , *bhāluk* 'beer', *māch* 'fish', *kacchap* 'tortoise', *cil* 'kite', *khargoś* 'rabbit', *kyaṅgāru* 'kangaroo', *tiyāpākhi* 'parrot', , *bhetki* 'fish', *māchi* 'fly', *śāp* 'snake', etc. denote a neutral or impartial sense.

Semantico-Pragmatic Motivations Behind using Animal Names

It is intriguing to understand the semantico-pragmatic motivations of people using particular animal names in language as different meanings of animal names tend to denote different ideas. It is found that human cognition plays a very crucial role while choosing the right animal names and using them appropriately. Generally, people use a particular animal name based on his or her choice to convey different meanings. Since all men are not same, and since some differences are conditioned by the change in social-semiotic environment where people live and interact, creative use of animal names reflects on the language change as well as change of a society. Thus, it is sentiments, urgency, and situations, which actually motivates people to opt for metaphorical usage of the animal names.

Some animal names are used quite frequently for addressing people. In Bengali, six animal names have recorded their usages above or equal to eight in this function. Interestingly, contrary to our expectation, the analysis of the sentences shows that these animal names are mainly used to yield a positive sense towards an addressee rather than a negative one. The following sentences show how animal names are used to appreciate courage, beauty, or strength, etc. of others.

(4) (or mato bāgher bāccā bartamān bhārater krikeṭarder madhye nei)
"None is there in Indian cricket team like him as brave as a tiger"

(5) (tomār gati aśver mato apratirodhya)

“Your speed is unstoppable like a horse”

(6) (or *cokhduṭo hariṇer cokher mato sundar*)

“Her eyes are as beautiful as that of a deer”

However, in maximum cases, animal names are used in negative sense in an abusive manner. It reflects on addresser’s attitude towards an addressee as well as on his psychology. Moreover, when animal names are used as slang, they determine personality and co-determine social identity of an addresser. Furthermore, they individualize an addresser classifying him as a human being belonging to a type, who uses animal names in certain manners to manifest different social taboos and senses, as the following examples show:

(7) (*o ekṭā khaccar*)

“He is indeed a mule”

(8) (*śuyor kothākār!*)

“You are a swine”

(9) (*śālā, buṛo bhām ekṭā*)

“Damn, an old civet!”

Since human beings have already ‘mentally colonized the animal kingdoms’ (Gibbs 1985), it is not surprising to find people using animal metaphors to express noble characteristics they aspire to possess, express degrading respects to others, or demonstrate personalities of fellow individuals. For instance, consider various usages of *gādhā* ‘donkey’ where Bengali people use this particular animal name either in derogatory sense or in the sense of abuse or endearment to refer to a person of a very limited intelligence.

(10) (*gādhār matan kathā balis nā*)

“Don’t speak like a donkey”

(11) “or *preme paṛei gādhā haye geli!*)

“After falling in love, you turn into a donkey!”

(12) (ei gādhāke piṭiye ghoṛā karā yābe nā)

“This donkey cannot be made into horse by beating”

In these examples, *gādhā* refers to different senses and concepts, e.g., hard labour, foolishness, stupidity, routine and non-creative works, etc., most of which are derogatory in sense. In Bengali, *gādhā* has been associated with routine-bound repetitive tasks done with sluggishness, stupidity, and in untidy manner. It has two idioms related to this animal: *gādhār khāṭuni* “a long, dull, heavy, and thankless toil sans intelligence”, and *gādhāboṭ* “a very slow-moving boat carrying cargo”. Besides *gādhā*, there are some more animal names, such as, *chāgal* ‘goat’, *goru* ‘cow’, *rārchāgal* ‘ram’, *balad* ‘bullock’, *paṭhā* ‘he-goat’, *bheṛā* ‘sheep’, *murgi* ‘hen’, etc. which are also used to refer to the short intelligence or stupidity of a person, as the following examples show.

(13) (Pareś ekṭā goru)

“Paresh is a cow”

(14) (o ekṭā nireṭ ramchāgal)

“He is a real ram”

(15) (ore balad, eṭāo bujhte pārli nā)

“Oh bullock! You could not understand this also!”

In the sentences above, apart from enhancing the fact that an addressee lacks in some level of intelligence and maturity, other connotations are merged/tagged with the terms. In fact, in order to quantify or magnify the aspect of foolishness, addressees are equated with animal names like *chāgal* ‘goat’, *goru* ‘cow’, *rārchāgal* ‘ram’, *balad* ‘bullock’, *paṭhā* ‘he-goat’, *bheṛā* ‘sheep’, and *murgi* ‘hen’, etc. Interestingly, in all the cases, a clear reflection on superiority or better intelligence of the addresser is reflected. Also, shades for demoralizing an addressee is quite clear in these terms, which is pathetically prominent among Bengali people. In most cases, attempts have been made for making comparisons between animals

and addressees where there is not only an implicit comparison but also a derogatory sense. For their poor intelligence, addressees are not only referred to as animals; but also are embodied to possess some of the inherent attributes and features of animals.

In many languages, it has been a common practice to compare physical attributes of people with that of animals (Pettit 1982, Pulman 1982, Norrick 1986, Davies and Bentahila 1989). In Bengali also, there is no exception to this as the following examples show.

(16) (yā moṭā haccho, dudin bādei khodār khāsi haye yābe)
 “As you are swelling up, you will become god’s castrated goat”

(17) (cheleṭā chāgaldāri rekheche)
 “The boy has kept beard like a goat”.

(18) (gaṇḍārer cāmṛā tor, gāye lāgbe nā)
 “You have a skin of a rhino, it will not affect you)

Above examples show how people tend to compare abnormally obese persons with a castrated goat used for meat; finds semblance of a French-cut beard with the beard of a goat; or compares the skin of a person with that of a rhino. Thus, it becomes a common practice in the Bengali society to compare human physical attributes with that of animals, birds or insects to evoke a sense of joke, fun, liking, disliking, abuse, or insult.

Another important dimension of this study is to explore if there is any discrimination in using animal names to address male and female persons. The study of Schulz (1975) has exhibited how women are derogated implicitly or explicitly in speech and writing produced by male members as a part of the strategy used for confirming patriarchal dominance in society. In the study of Halupka-Resetar and Radic (2003) it is observed that most of the animal names are used to address both male and female members as addressees. In their findings, however, there are at least three animal names (e.g., *cow*, *hen*, and *vixen*), which are exclusively used to address the female persons. On the other hand, there is not a single animal

name, which is exclusively used to describe or refer to a male addressee. That means, barring a few terms all the other animal names are used indiscriminately to address both male and female persons. In Bengali also, there is hardly any discrimination in use of animal names to refer to male or female addressees. Barring a few exceptions, such as *kutti* 'bitch', *bhāgalpurī gāi* 'cow from Bhagalpur', *chāgalī* 'she-goat', *gādhī* 'she-donkey', *bandarī* 'female monkey', *bāghinī* 'tigress', etc. all animal names are normally used to address both male and female members as addressees.

Conclusion

A natural language, as an evolutionary outcome of human civilization (Pinker 1995), passes through several diachronic stages of onomasiological and semasiological adoption and adaptation by which the members of a speech community are able to accommodate new ideas, beliefs, and concepts for exchanging information, making plans, expressing views, sharing arguments, appreciating others or dehumanizing opponents. In most of these events, use of animal names has become crucial as their presence invariably enhances effectiveness, accuracy, and appropriateness of speech – a unique phenomenon, which in a reverse manner, reflects on the sociocultural life and the nature of cognition and action of the speakers. The present study is a seed paper in which an attempt is made to provide a short glimpse on the intricate texture of use of animal names in Bengali speech and evaluating their functional roles in reflecting on the society and people, at large. Since this is a pilot study, perhaps we can perhaps visualize its panoramic relevance in different layers and shades of human existence with close reference to the usage of these terms in discourse, idioms, proverbs, and other means of language use to understand how these terms contribute to form and fossilize collective cognition of the speech community. Moreover, studies may be made to analyze the morpho-syntactic structures and lexico-semantic roles of these expressions with close reference to those typical discourses and situations that provoke such occurrences in the language. Such studies have tremendous potential to not only reflect on the pragmatic-semiotic components and attributes of a society, but also to refer to the information embedded within sociolinguistics of a language and its people.

References

- Craddick, Ray and Miller, John. 1970. Investigation of the Symbolic Self-using of the Concentric Circles Method and Animal Metaphor. *Journal of Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 31(1).Pp. 147-160.
- Davies, E.E. and Bentahila, Abdelali. 1989. Familiar and Less Familiar Metaphors. *Language and Communication*, 9(1).Pp. 49-68.
- Fernandez, F. A and Rosa Maria, J. C. 2003. Semantic Derogation in Animal Metaphor: A Contrastive-Cognitive Analysis of two Male/Female Examples in English and Spanish. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 35(5).Pp. 771-797.
- Fraser, B. 1979. The Interpretation of Novel Metaphors. In Ortony, A. (ed.).*Metaphor and Thought*. Pp.45-56. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gibbs, R. 1985. On the Process of Understanding Idioms. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 14(3).Pp.465-472.
- Halupka-Resetar, Sabina and Radic Biljana. 2003. Animal Names Used in Addressing People in Serbian. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 35(12).Pp. 1891-1902.
- Hsieh, Shelley, C-Y. 2002. Cat Expressions in Mandarin Chinese and German: Animal Expressions and Cultural Perspectives. *Paper Presented at the 10th International Conference on Cognitive Processing of Chinese and Other Related Asian Languages*. National Taiwan University, Taipei. Dec. 9-11.
- Hsieh, Shelley C-Y and Chinfa Lien. 2004. The Compositionality of Botanical Concepts in Languages: A Study of Mandarin Chinese and German Plant Fixed Expressions. *Paper Presented at Compositionality, Concepts, and Cognition: An Interdisciplinary Conference on Cognitive Science (CoCoCo 2004)*. Heinrich Heine University, Düsseldorf, Germany, February 28 -March 3, 2004.
- Nesi, Hilary. 1995. A Modern Bestiary: A Contrastive Study of the Figurative Meanings of Animal Terms. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 49(2).Pp. 272-278.
- Norrick, N. R. 1986. Stock Similes. *Journal of Literary Semantics*, 15(1).Pp. 39-52.
- Pettit, P. 1982. The Demarcation of Metaphors. *Language and Communication*, 2(1).Pp. 1-21.

Pinker, Steven. 1995. *The Language Instinct: The New Science of Language and Mind*. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books.

Pulman, S. G. 1982. Are Metaphors 'Creative'? *Journal of Literary Semantics*, 11(1).Pp. 23-38.

Schulz, Muriel. 1975. The Semantic Derogation of Women. In Thorne, B. and Henley, N. (eds.). *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*.Pp. 64-75. Massachusetts: Newbury House.

Sutton, Laurel A. 1995. Bitches and Skanky Hoobags: the Place of Women in Contemporary Slang. In Hall, K. and M. Burholtz (eds.). *Gender Articulated*. Pp.75-87. London: Routledge.

Whaley, C. Robert and Antonelli,George. 1983. The Birds and the Beasts - Woman as Animals. *Maledicta*, 7(2). Pp.219-229.

