

Metaphorical Use of Feline Onomatopoeic Verbs

Kazuko INOUE *

Abstract

Over the past few decades, a number of studies have been conducted on animal metaphors. In this study, we are concerned with verbs that typically refer to actions of animals but are instead used to describe those of humans, especially sound-emission verbs that refer to cries or onomatopoeia related to cats. This paper takes a text-based approach in order to examine examples in which feline sound-emission or onomatopoeic verbs are metaphorically used in authentic discourse in English. It also considers how these verbs are semantically extended from onomatopoeic meanings to other meanings that refer to human actions from a cognitive linguistic perspective. In conclusion, there are two types of animal metaphors involved in feline onomatopoeic verbs: metaphor based on similarity and metaphor from metonymy based on contiguity and similarity between the source domain CAT and the target domain HUMAN.

Keywords: animal metaphor, sound-emission verb, onomatopoeia, semantic extension

I Introduction

Over the past few decades, a number of studies have been conducted on animal metaphors. For example, Lakoff et al. (1991) provide over 1,700 metaphorical phrases and sentences relating to animals such as LUSTFUL PERSON IS AN ANIMAL. In this study, we are concerned with verbs that typically refer to actions of animals but are instead used to describe those of humans, especially sound-emission verbs that refer to cries or onomatopoeia related to cats (henceforth, “feline onomatopoeic verbs”). This paper takes a text-based approach in order to examine examples in which feline onomatopoeic verbs are metaphorically used in authentic discourse in English. It also considers how those verbs are semantically extended from onomatopoeic meanings to other meanings that refer to human actions from a cognitive linguistic perspective.

* School of Education, Kansai University of International Studies

II Previous Studies

Kövecses (2002) claims that “[m]uch of human behavior seems to be metaphorically understood in terms of animal behavior” (Kövecses 2002: 124) and gives examples of the general conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS as in (1a, b), where ANIMALS is the source domain and PEOPLE is the target domain. More precisely, Lakoff et al. (1991) give several examples of the conceptual metaphor LUSTFUL PERSON IS AN ANIMAL, as in (2a–c). Thus, animals often act as a source domain, and various nouns that refer not only to general categories such as “animal” in (2a), but also to specific types of animals, such as “brute” in (1a), “swine” in (1b), “wolf” in (2b), and “tigress” in (2c), are metaphorically used in popular discourse.

- (1) a. That man was a *brute*, he spent the little he earned on drink.
 b. Look at the things that have been done by these *swine*. (Kövecses 2002: 125, emphasis mine)
- (2) a. He is an *animal*.
 b. He is a real *wolf*.
 c. A *tigress* in bed. (Lakoff et al. 1991: 162, emphasis mine)

Lakoff et al. (1991) give another example of animal metaphors, as in (3). Verbs that refer to actions of animals such as *pounce* in (3) are often used metaphorically. Kövecses (2000) also gives several examples of actions of animals under ANGRY BEHAVIOR IS AGGRESSIVE ANIMAL BEHAVIOR, as in (4). The sound-emission verb ‘*snarl*’ literally denotes an animal making a rough growl in response to a threat, but in this case it is used as a metaphor to denote someone speaking in an ill-tempered voice.

- (3) He looks like he’s ready to *pounce*. (Lakoff et al. 1991: 162, emphasis mine)
- (4) Don’t *snarl* at me! (Kövecses 2000: 21, emphasis mine)

In terms of parts of speech, Deignan (2005) discusses the grammatical conversion of parts of speech of animal metaphors. Table 1 summarizes the parts of speech of animal metaphors. She notes that there are very few corpus examples of metaphors that equate a person with an animal in a straightforward A = B, “Richard is a gorilla,” format as in (1a) and (2a, b) above, and where there are both a noun metaphor and an adjective or verb metaphor, the noun metaphor tends to be used much less frequently than other parts of speech. Accordingly, animal metaphors are frequently used as verbs to describe human behavior or attributes. Inoue (2010) focuses on examples of sound-emission verbs related to dogs such as *bark*, *yap*, and *howl*. She argues their metaphorical use to denote human behavior, especially speech as in (5a–c), and insists that a metaphorical mapping from the source domain DOG to the target domain PEOPLE is based on the similarity between the sounds dogs emit and the voice humans do.

Table 1 Parts of speech of animal metaphors (Deignan 2005: 153)

Noun and verb as conventional metaphors		
pig	Noun	...a bunch of racist <i>pigs</i> .
pig	Verb	He had probably <i>pigged</i> out in a fast-food place.
Noun and adjective as conventional metaphors		
cat	Noun	...a bunch of fat <i>cats</i> with fast cars.
catty	Adj	... <i>catty</i> remarks.
Noun, verb, and adjective as conventional metaphors		
dog	Noun	...an old <i>dog</i> .
dog	Verb	... feeling of dread that had been <i>dogging</i> her all day.
dogged	Adj	...and enviable reputation for <i>dogged</i> determination and skill.

(5) a. The officer *barked* an order, and the soldiers jumped into action.

b. Well, they were all drinking champagne and *yapping* away.

c. The audience *howled* and clapped.

(Inoue 2010: 90–92)

In the following section, we focus on sounds or noises that cats emit and consider the sound-emission or onomatopoeic verbs that denote these sounds and their metaphorical use in English. Examples are collected from several corpora such as the British National Corpus (BNC)¹ and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA),² and major dictionaries.³

III Feline Onomatopoeic Verbs

1. Mew/Meow

Searches for words that refer to a cat such as *cat*, *kitten*, *tom*, and *tabby* in several corpora and dictionaries yield results that these nouns frequently occur as a subject of a sentence and are followed by sound-emission verbs referring to cat cries or sounds: e.g., *mew*, *purr*, *trill*, *hiss*, *spit*, *chatter*, *growl*, *snarl*, and *yowl*. We shall take three of the most typical feline sounds—*mew*, *purr*, and *hiss*—as examples, and consider their figurative use in this section.

‘To *mew* or *meow*’ is one of the most typical feline onomatopoeic verbs.⁴ It usually denotes a characteristic soft, high-pitched crying noise that a cat emits as in (6a, b). According to Morgan (2016), there are numerous ways to say *meow*, and these sounds are associated with different feline emotions. In fact, we can find many examples of a cat’s meowing in the corpora and dictionaries, but the reason it meows varies in each context. For example, a cat meows as a sign of greeting, affection, appreciation, piteousness, or request in (7a–c).

(6) Onomatopoeia

a. Her fluffy white cat *mewed* and jumped onto the table. (OSD: written unedited, American English, fiction)

b. Her cat *meowed* as he got up and screeched at her feet and then walked over toward her.

(OSD: written unedited, American English, fiction)

(7) Onomatopoeia + emotion

- a. She meowed and pawed at my leg in greeting. (COCA: 2017 FIC Bk:HauntedIsAlwaysFashion)
- b. The black cat in her arms meowed affectionately. (COCA: 2004 FIC ArkansasRev)
- c. He stood two meters high, minus a few centimeters, and carried a green-and-white mottled sun kitten.
[...] It mewed appreciatively and stretched on its back. (COCA: 1993 FIC BkSF:MovingMars)
- d. The cat meowed piteously and followed her throughout the room.
(OSD: written unedited, American English, fiction)
- e. A cat will meow at you when it wants food or water.
(OSD: written unedited, British English, weblog: personal)

These verbs can denote human speech as in (8a, b). ‘To *mew/meow*’ is used as a verb for a human saying something in this case, but in both contexts the speakers are female and seem to speak in a soft, high-pitched voice like a cat’s. These examples are interpreted as metaphor since they are simply based on the auditory similarity between the cat cry and the human voice. In other words, ‘to *mew*’ refers to making a mewling sound in a literal use for cats, but to uttering ‘as if mewling’ in a figurative use for humans. In addition, the verb can function as a speech verb, introducing utterances both directly as in (8a, b) and (9b), and indirectly as in (9a).

On the other hand, ‘to *mew/meow*’ tends to be used for negative utterances that imply a complaint, spitefulness, or criticism as in (9a, b). The speaker shows “her complaint” by speaking in a certain tone of voice in (9a). (9b) also denotes that the speaker uttered the words “[s]he never comes in to the office in the mornings” in a certain tone of voice, which implies that the speaker may not like the behavior of the woman she mentioned in her utterance and would like her to come in to the office in the mornings if she could. These examples are based on the similarity between the crying sound a cat makes and the tone of voice with which a human speaks. Although a cat mews for various reasons as mentioned above, ‘to *mew*’ sometimes can indicate a negative manner of speech such as a complaint or spitefulness. This is partly because a mewling noise could sound like a nasal voice, which is often associated with the nasty or spiteful voice of a human complaining or making spiteful comments. That is, these examples denote that a person utters something spiteful in a high nasal voice ‘as if *mewling*.’

(8) Speech + voice quality

- a. “Hello, sailor,” she *mewed*, “you’re wanting a ship and I have one. I’m always on the prowl for sailors,” she purred, and she gave me a wink. (COCA: 1998 FIC ContempFic)
- b. “Where are you off to, Rusty?” *meowed* a familiar voice behind him... (COCA: 2004 FIC Bk:IntoWild)

(9) Speech + voice quality + manner of speech

- a. She *mewed* her complaints. (Kenkyusha’s New English-Japanese Dictionary)
- b. “She never comes in to the office in the mornings,” she *mewed*. (COCA: 1992 FIC BkSF:QuantumLeap)

2. Purr

‘To *purr*’ is another typical feline onomatopoeic verb. It usually refers to a low, throaty, continuous vibrating sound a cat emits, as in (10a–c). Morgan (2016) points out that there are many sounds a cat emits, each with its own unique meaning, and that a cat generally purrs when it is contented and happy, such as when you pet it. We can understand from this that the cat felt good, happy, and contented and, therefore, purred because its owner “Daniel” scratched it in (10a), because it was being groomed in (10b), and from its action of “curling through her mistress’ legs” in (10c). Thus, ‘to *purr*’ usually refers to making the continuous vibrating sound of a cat and, at the same time, implies the concomitant emotion, that is, contentment, as the cat itself feels contented when purring. In other words, a certain emotion causes such a sound in these instances.

(10) Onomatopoeia + emotion

- a. The cat *purred* loudly as Daniel scratched him behind the ears.
(OSD: written unedited, American English, fiction)
- b. Lauren groomed Samoa’s soft fur gently, and the cat *purred* loudly.
(OSD: written unedited, American English, fiction)
- c. The orange striped black cat *purred* and stalked towards the pool table, curling through her mistress’ legs.
(OSD: written unedited, American English, fiction)

Similar to the examples of ‘to *mew/meow*’ in (8a, b) and (9a, b), ‘to *purr*’ is also used to denote human speech in (11a–d). We comprehend that “[h]is voice” sounded in (11a), “[t]he female voice” sounded in (11b), the speaker said that “she just wanted to spend forever and ever with the windows thrown wide open [...]” in (11c), and the speakers said “I love you darling” in (11d), all of which utterances are said in a soft, low voice. These are based on the auditory similarity between the cat sound and the human voice. Since a human cannot make the vibratory purring sound that a cat can, only voice quality, soft and low, is metaphorically mapped in this case.

(11) Speech + voice quality

- a. His voice *purred* along, low and controlled. (The Kenkyusha Dictionary of English Collocation)
- b. The female voice *purred* seductively in his ear. (OSD: written unedited, American English, fiction)
- c. She *purred* that she just wanted to spend forever and ever with the windows thrown wide open and the balcony doors thrown wide open way atop the clutter of Eighth Avenue—everybody hurrying in and out of the theaters, the handsome Hudson beyond in the Commander hotel. (COCA: 2006 FIC SouthernRev)
- d. “I love you darling,” they *purred* to each other. (The Kenkyusha Dictionary of English Collocation)

The verb can also be used for humans, not only when they speak in a soft, low voice but also to express a sense of contentment, as in (12a–c). We understand that the speaker spoke in a soft, low voice “with content” in (12a), “pleasedly [*sic*]” in (12b), and “with typical blitheness” in (12c). As we have seen, since a sound and an emotion naturally co-occur in the literal use, ‘to *purr*’ in the figurative use, as in (12a–c), should be considered metaphor from metonymy (Goossens 1990). That is, these examples are

based on the contiguity or simultaneity between a sound and an emotion, and only the emotion of a cat, which frequently co-occurs with the emission of a purring sound, is metaphorically mapped.

(12) Speech + voice quality + emotion

- a. My mother purred with content. (Taishukan's Unabridged Genius English-Japanese Dictionary)
- b. "Well, I thought it would be nice to surprise you, Foxy," Sheila purred pleasantly as she looked him over.
(OSD: unknown, unknown, unknown)
- c. "I realized immediately that this was going to be a profound anecdote, and I've been dining out on it since,"
he purrs, with typical blitheness. (OSD: written edited, British English, news: national and world)

3. Hiss

'To *hiss*' is another typical feline onomatopoeic verb. It usually expresses a sharp, sibilant sound a cat emits as in (13a–d). Morgan (2016) explains that a hiss is a sound which conveys that a cat is angry and will not tolerate whatever it is that is upsetting it. We understand that the cat became angry and hissed because the person "stepped on its tail" in (13a), and from its behavior, "the cat arched its back" in (13b), "swishing his tail" in (13c), and "bit him" in (13d). In these instances, a certain emotion of the cat, anger, provokes it to emit a specific sound, hiss, similar to the examples of 'to *purr*' in (10a–c).

(13) Onomatopoeia (cat) + emotion

- a. My cat *hissed* when I stepped on its tail. (COB)
- b. As soon as I was done, the cat started *hissing* and spitting and arched its back.
(OSD: written unedited, American English, fiction)
- c. Once again, the cat *hissed*, swishing his tail until he was out of sight.
(OSD: written unedited, British English, fiction)
- d. Suddenly, the cat twisted around, *hissed*, and bit him at the fleshy point between the thumb and forefinger, drawing blood. (COCA: 2010 FIC Bk:NarrowWorld)

Unlike the examples of 'to *mew/meow*' and 'to *purr*' discussed above, humans can emit a hissing sound similar to the hiss of cats. In (14a, b) the people actually emitted sharp, sibilant hissing sounds with their mouths. In these cases, 'to *hiss*' is simply used as an onomatopoeic verb. Moreover, it can also be used in negative contexts for humans, as in (15a, b). "He" emitted a hissing sound to show his anger in (15a) and "his disdain" in (15b).

(14) Onomatopoeia (human)

- a. Still, the cat sat motionless and watchful. I *hissed*. But the cat did not move.
(COCA: 2011 FIC AntiochRev)
- b. Her toenail caught the edge of her sock as she tugged it up, and she *hissed* with pain.
(COCA: 2009 FIC Bk:AgeBeforeBeauty)

(15) Onomatopoeia (human) + emotion

- a. He could almost see the man's spit flying from his mouth as he hissed angrily into the phone.
(OSD: written unedited, American English, fiction)
- b. He hissed his disdain.
(The Kenkyusha Dictionary of English Collocation)

In the same way as 'to *mew/meow*' and 'to *purr*,' 'to *hiss*' can also denote human speech, as in (16a–d). All of these utterances are understood to have been made in a sharp but very quiet, almost inaudible voice because of the implication of maintaining secrecy when the speaker told "the password" in (16a) and said something "in my ear" in (16b), "under her breath" in (16c), and "sotto voce" in (16d). These should be interpreted as metaphor based on the auditory similarity between the hissing sound of cats/humans and the voice quality when one is speaking. The verb can be used for humans not only when speaking in a very quiet voice but also to express a specific emotion, generally anger, as we see in (17a–d). The speaker said something "angrily" in (17a), "scornfully" in (17b), "furiously" in (17c), and "fiercely" in (17d). These examples are classified as metaphor from metonymy since a hissing sound and an angry emotion often co-occur in the source domain and an emotion, anger, is metaphorically mapped here.

(16) Speech + voice quality

- a. He hissed the password to his fellow conspirator. (The Kenkyusha Dictionary of English Collocation)
- b. "Leave Dueine alone," she hissed in my ear. (COCA: 2002 FIC FantasySciFi)
- c. "Oh, Jesus," she hissed under her breath. (COCA: 2010 FIC Bk:ShadesMidnight)
- d. "Thanks a lot, Pat," she hissed sotto voce. (COCA: 1990 FIC Bk:Malibu)

(17) Speech + voice quality + emotion

- a. "I was told you were the best," he hissed angrily, in a deep gravelly voice that sent a chill into Ark's bones.
(OSD: written unedited, American English, fiction)
- b. "Surely not," she hissed scornfully. (COCA: 1999 FIC Analog)
- c. "What the hell's going on?" he hissed furiously. (WB: UK Written)
- d. With what breath she had she hissed fiercely, "Keep ahold of that child before you drop her and say't was me who made you. I'm going back to Xanadu, and you can't stop me." (COCA: 1995 FIC Bk:Wedding)

IV Discussion

Figure 1 provides an analysis and illustration of how the onomatopoeic verb 'to *hiss*' is structured in terms of the relevant salient attributes of cats that are mapped onto the target domain HUMAN. In this case, it allows three different metaphorical uses: 1) a metaphorical mapping based on the auditory similarity between certain sounds of cats and humans, 2) a metaphorical mapping based on the similarity between the sound quality of cats and the voice quality of humans, and 3) a metonymy-based metaphorical mapping based on the contiguity between the sound and the emotion of cats and the

similarity between certain emotions of cats and humans. In the third use, the emotion, anger, is metaphorically mapped from the source domain CAT onto the target domain HUMAN, and it constitutes metaphor from metonymy since a hissing sound and an angry emotion are originally linked in the source domain CAT.

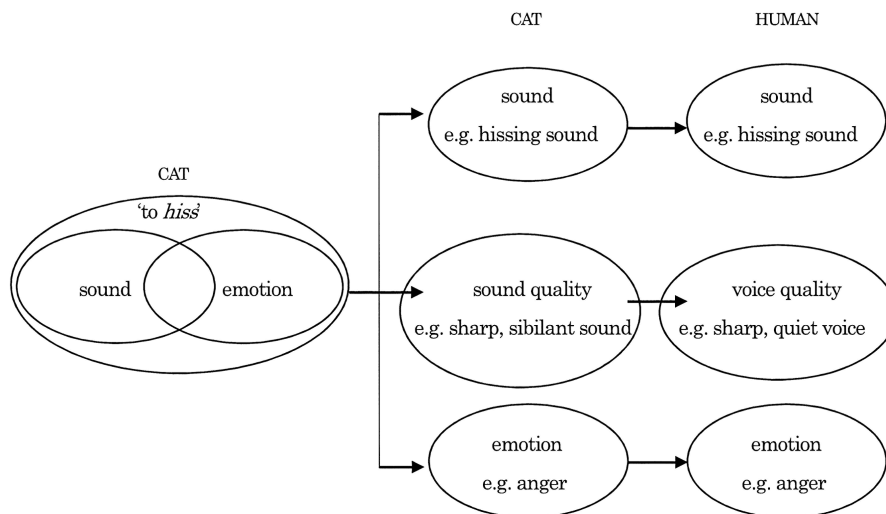


Figure 1 Metaphorical mappings of 'to hiss'

Table 2 summarizes the various figurative uses of the feline onomatopoeic verbs that we have discussed and those structures in the source and target domains. Although metaphor in general allows many concepts in the source domain to be mapped onto corresponding concepts in the target domain, we have found that some of the most salient attributes of the source domain CAT, such as sounds, quality, and emotions, tend to be mapped onto the abstract and complex target domain HUMAN with respect to onomatopoeic verbs. These can be categorized into two types of metaphor: metaphor and metaphor from metonymy.

Table 2 Metaphorical use of feline onomatopoeic verbs

	Source Domain (CAT)	Target Domain (HUMAN)	Metaphor/Metonymy
mew	onomatopoeia e.g. mewling sound	---	---
	sound quality e.g. soft, high sound	voice quality e.g. soft, high voice	metaphor
		manner of speech e.g. complaint, spitefulness	metaphor
purr	onomatopoeia e.g. purring sound	---	---
	sound quality e.g. soft, low sound	voice quality e.g. soft, low voice	metaphor
	emotion e.g. contentment	emotion e.g. contentment	metaphor from metonymy
hiss	onomatopoeia e.g. hissing sound	onomatopoeia e.g. hissing sound	metaphor
	sound quality e.g. sharp, sibilant sound	voice quality e.g. sharp, quiet voice	metaphor
	emotion e.g. anger	emotion e.g. anger	metaphor from metonymy

V Conclusion

Through a text-based approach to analyze feline sound-emission or onomatopoeic verbs in the examples from the corpora and the dictionaries, we have shown how animal metaphors function, and are structured in authentic discourse in English. We have found that these verbs are semantically extended from onomatopoeic

meanings in their literal use to other meanings that refer to human actions based on similarity and contiguity in their figurative use, that can be grouped into three types: 1) a metaphorical mapping based on the auditory similarity of sounds, 2) a metaphorical mapping based on the similarity of a sound to voice quality, and 3) a metonymy-based metaphorical mapping based on the contiguity and similarity of a sound and an emotion. We therefore conclude that there are two types of animal metaphors related to feline onomatopoeic verbs: metaphor based on similarity and metaphor from metonymy based on contiguity and similarity between the source domain CAT and the target domain HUMAN.

¹ The British National Corpus (BNC) (<https://www.english-corpora.org/bnc/>) was originally created by Oxford University Press in the 1980s and early 1990s. It contains 100 million words of texts from a wide range of genres (e.g., spoken, fiction, magazines, newspapers, and academic).

² The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) (<https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>) is the only large, genre-balanced corpus of American English. It contains more than 560 million words of text (20 million words each year between 1990 and 2017) and is equally divided among spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, and academic texts.

³ Oxford Sentence Dictionary ©Oxford University Press 2008 (OSD), Collins COBUILD Advanced Dictionary of English (COB), 5-million-Wordbank from the Bank of English ®©Harper Collins Publishers 1995 (WB), and others.

⁴ Some other variant spellings are allowed: e.g., *miaow* (in British English), *mioau*, and *miaul*.

References

- Goossens, Louis. (1990). "Metaphtonymy: The Interaction of Metaphor and Metonymy in Expressions for Linguistic Action." *Cognitive Linguistics*, 1: 323–340.
- Inoue, Kazuko. (2010). "Inu no Nakigoe o Arawasu Giseigo-Dooshi no Hiyusei [Metaphoricity of Canine Onomatopoeic Verbs. *Gengo-Bunka Kyoodoo-Kenkyuu Projekuto 2009: Retorikku no Bunka to Rekishi-Sei [Joint Research Project of Language and Culture 2009: Culture and History of Rhetoric]*, 87–96. Graduate School of Language and Culture, Osaka University.
- Kövecses, Zoltán. (2000). *Metaphor and Emotion: Language, Culture, and Body in Human Feeling*. Cambridge, U.K./New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kövecses, Zoltán. (2002). *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lakoff, George, Jane Espenson, and Alan Schwartz. (1991). *Master Metaphor List: Second Edition*. Cognitive Linguistics Group, University of California at Berkeley.
- Morgan, Kim O. (2016). *How to Listen to Your Cat: The Complete Guide to Communicating with Your Feline Friend*. Ocala, Florida: Atlantic Publishing Group, Inc.