**ANIMAL METAPHORS AND SEMANTIC DEROGATION – DO
WOMEN THINK DIFFERENTLY FROM MEN?**

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***Abstract:** From a Cognitive Linguistics standpoint the paper looks at how Serbian university students of both sexes apply 20 animal names to women and their physical or mental traits. The paper aims to show (1) what animal names are used as positive or negative metaphors for women; (2) whether the same animal imagery is used by both sexes in semantic derogation of women; and (3) whether male students exhibit a higher degree of semantic derogation of women compared to female students.*

***Key words:** animal metaphor, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, semantic derogation, Serbian.*

1. Introduction

As research has already convincingly shown, animal metaphors are common in many languages (for Serbian see e.g. Halupka-Rešetar & Radić

2003; Prodanović-Stankić 2004; for other languages see e.g. Talebinejad & Dastjerdi 2005; Hsieh 2006; Silaški & Đurović 2010; etc.) and the mechanism of zoosemy seems to be responsible for an amazing array of terms pertaining to human characteristics. In terms of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, as developed and elaborated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), this proves that “the domain of animals is an extremely productive source domain” (Kövecses 2002:17). Moreover, animal imagery is used in many languages as one of the tools of constructing social identity and as “one of the main mechanisms that contribute to the diffusion and ingraining of folk beliefs” (López Rodríguez 2009:78). This author (2009:94) also claims that

[a]nimal metaphors not only have a cognitive basis, but are also culturally motivated, that is, they reflect the attitudes and beliefs held by a particular community towards certain animal species, and, therefore, may vary from culture to culture, in time and space.

Nesi (1994:274) also points out that

[i]n each culture, certain animal terms are strongly linked with certain attributes. and there is communal agreement about what these attributes are. This does not mean that such metaphors are ‘dead’: on the contrary, they form a very vital part of the language. and are frequently used to powerful effect.

That is why an investigation of the use of animal metaphoric imagery in a particular culture and language may produce important insights into the prevailing cultural model in that society. Dealing with the issue of the connection between metaphor and culture, Deignan (2003:257) develops the following hypothesis:

if members of a particular culture hold a particular attitude toward a particular animal, then that animal might be used to stand metaphorically for a particular quality in their language.

Therefore, not only is it possible to establish what attributes each animal connotes in a particular culture or whether these animal metaphors are mainly used positively or negatively, but also, as is our intention in this paper, whether men and women differ as regards their use of animal metaphors and whether they use them for the purpose of semantic derogation.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this paper will be that of Conceptual Metaphor Theory as developed and propounded by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who clearly point out that metaphor is not only a textual decoration, a simple figure of speech, or a device of the poetic imagination, as was once widely believed, but far more than this – it is an important cognitive tool which we use in our daily thinking. According to the proponents of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, conceptual metaphor refers to the understanding of one, usually abstract and less structured, concept, described as the *target* conceptual domain, in terms of another, more physical and more easily comprehensible concept, called the *source* conceptual domain, i.e. it consists of a set of mappings or correspondences between the linked source and target domains. Metaphors shape the way we think and in this regard may be viewed as an important instrument used when we categorise the world and make sense of abstract, mostly intangible and difficult-to-understand concepts. They reflect our conceptual structure, which means that they occur in speech because our *mind* is metaphorical in

nature (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, Lakoff & Turner 1989, Kövecses 2002, etc.). In other words, researching what we *say* may help us to establish what we actually *think*.

In this paper, therefore, an attempt will be made to ascertain, from a Cognitive Linguistics standpoint, how Serbian university students of both sexes apply twenty animal names to women and their physical or mental traits. The paper aims to show the following: (1) what animal names are used as positive or negative metaphors for women; (2) whether the same animal imagery is used by both sexes in semantic derogation of women; and (3) whether male students exhibit a higher degree of semantic derogation of women compared to female students. To answer these questions, a specifically designed questionnaire was used, the results of which will be discussed in the sections to follow. As metaphors in general are rarely free from evaluative stance, the paper will hopefully show to what extent semantic derogation is manifested in the Serbian language by means of animal metaphor, as well as whether this is predominantly employed by men referring to women, or, alternatively, whether women adopt and perpetuate the same evaluations of female physical and mental traits as do men.

3. Animal Metaphors and Semantic Derogation

As Kövecses (2002:124) claims, “[m]uch of human behaviour seems to be metaphorically understood in terms of animal behaviour”. In an attempt to explain how the animal-related words acquired their metaphorical meanings, thus forming the HUMAN BEHAVIOUR IS ANIMAL BEHAVIOUR metaphor, Kövecses (2002:125) states the following:

The only way these meanings can have emerged is that humans attributed human characteristics to animals and then reapplied these characteristics to humans. That is, animals were personified first, and then the “human-based animal characteristics” were used to understand human behaviour. But it is not only human behaviour that is metaphorically understood in terms of animal behaviour; people themselves are also often described as animals of some kind.

Thus, the conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS structures our thoughts about human behaviour and its relevant aspects, meaning that “anthropomorphization of animal attributes and behaviour is almost always an input condition for the metaphorical applications of animal names” (Talebinejad & Dastjerdi 2005:145). Animal names are used to describe people, to assign them various desirable or undesirable animal properties, to address them with either abuse or affection, etc., thus demonstrating how certain aspects of animals and their instinctual attributes and behaviour patterns are mapped onto human beings. Such ANIMAL metaphors are metonymy-based, i.e. *typical properties* of an animal stand for that animal. Thus, in the process of metaphorisation only the most salient properties of animals (via metonymy motivated by the TYPICAL OVER NON-TYPICAL cognitive principle [Radden & Kövecses 1999:49]) are mapped onto people as a target domain.

Studies of animal metaphors have so far mainly focused on animal names used for the purposes of semantic derogation, and particularly on the differences between the animal names used to describe men and those used for women. A number of authors point out that “most, but certainly not all, animal-related metaphors capture the negative characteristics of human beings” (Talebinejad & Dastjerdi 2005:137), which “makes them suitable candidates for becoming derogatory terms” (López Rodríguez 2009:93).

Semantic derogation, the term which “implies both pejoration and polarization” (Fontecha & Catalán 2003:772), becomes especially challenging if it is used “in the context of gender and language” (Fontecha & Catalán 2003:772). To be specific, semantic derogation is usually related to androcentrism in language, because

[a]s western society has been (and still is) mostly governed by men, the patterns and norms of behaviour have been dictated by them. As a consequence, the attributes assigned to each of the sexes in the gender metaphor are highly androcentric since men are taken as the norm of reference. (Fontecha & Catalán 2003:772).

Moreover, research has shown that in English, for example, “a higher number of derogatory images is used in metaphors for describing women in comparison to those used for describing men (Holmes 1992, quoted in Fontecha & Catalán 2003:773). The question that still remains, however, is the following: if a language manifests semantic derogation of women by means of animal metaphoric imagery, who actually uses these metaphors? Is it men who use animal metaphors to refer derisively and disparagingly to women, or is it also women who, by using animal metaphoric imagery to refer to other women, actually perpetuate the derogation and objectification of women? In the text which follows we will discuss the case of Serbian.

4. The Questionnaire

An attempt will be made here to establish the extent to which men differ from women with regard to the use of animal metaphors for the purpose of semantic derogation. A purpose-designed questionnaire was used to gather

information regarding the use of animal names to refer to women by male and female respondents. The questionnaire contained 20 animal names, of which 13 were the names of domestic animals (*mačka* ‘cat’, *patka* ‘duck’, *svinja* ‘pig’, *krmača* ‘sow’, *kokoška* ‘hen’, *koza* ‘she goat’, *kuja* ‘bitch’, *ovca* ‘sheep’, *kobila* ‘mare’, *krava* ‘cow’, *guska* ‘goose’, *ćurka* ‘turkey’, *mazga* ‘mule’), and 7 the names of wild animals (*lisica* ‘fox’, *riba* ‘fish’, *tigrica* ‘tigress’, *zmija* ‘snake’, *slonica* ‘elephant’, *žirafa* ‘giraffe’, and *lavica* ‘lioness’). Although already attested in literature as playing a major role in the semantic derogation of women by drawing on the animal realm (e.g. López Rodríguez 2007), diminutives (e.g. the names of the young of animals) were excluded from the analysis. After some general questions regarding their gender and age, respondents were asked to do the following: firstly, to circle the names of those animals which they would use to refer to a woman, either positively or negatively; and secondly, to give the characteristics (physical and/or mental) of a female person that they would refer to by using a selected animal name. Thirty male and thirty female respondents, all aged 21-23, filled in the same questionnaire. They are all students at the Faculty of Economics, University of Belgrade.

Table 1 below shows what animal names, in what percentages, as well as whether in a positive, negative or neutral way, were used by male and female respondents respectively to refer to a woman.

ANIMAL NAME	% female respondents	evaluation by female respondents	% male respondents	evaluation by male respondents
1. MAČKA ‘CAT’	68%	+/-	90%	+/-
2. PATKA ‘DUCK’	3%	-	3%	-
3. SVINJA ‘PIG’	29%	-	13%	-
4. KRMAČA ‘SOW’	26%	-	47%	-

5. KOKOŠKA 'HEN'	48%	-	67%	-
6. KOZA 'SHE GOAT'	48%	-	23%	-
7. KUJA 'BITCH'	3%	-	20%	-
8. OVCA 'SHEEP'	26%	-	37%	-
9. KOBILA 'MARE'	13%	-	0%	/
10. KRAVA 'COW'	39%	-	30%	-
11. LISICA 'FOX'	55%	+/-	50%	+/-
12. RIBA 'FISH'	55%	+/-	70%	+
13. TIGRICA 'TIGRESS'	19%	+/-	37%	+
14. GUSKA 'GOOSE'	19%	-	40%	-
15. ZMIJA 'SNAKE'	77%	-	60%	-
16. ČURKA 'TURKEY'	39%	-	53%	-
17. SLONICA 'SHE ELEPHANT'	3%	-	0%	/
18. MAZGA 'MULE'	26%	-	7%	-
19. ŽIRAFA 'GIRAFFE'	26%	NEUTRAL	20%	NEUTRAL
20. LAVICA 'LIONESS'	64%	+/-	57%	+

In the section which follows we will elaborate on the questions posed at the beginning of the paper regarding the differences between how men and women use animal names to refer to a woman.

5. Results and Discussion

Firstly, as far as the extent of usage of animal names is concerned, as can be seen from Table 1, female respondents would use the names of *all* the listed animals to refer to a woman, whereas male respondents would use all the listed names except two: *kobila* 'mare' and *slonica* 'she elephant'. Both of the animal names which men would never use to refer to a woman are used by female respondents to refer to a woman's physical appearance, namely to indicate fatness and obesity.

Secondly, as far as the endowment of animal metaphors with positive or negative connotations is concerned, our analysis shows that female respondents would *not* use any of the offered animal names to refer *only positively* to a woman, whereas animal names which men would definitely use to refer to a woman in a positive way are the following: *riba* ‘fish’, *tigrica* ‘tigress’ and *lavica* ‘lioness’ (all names of wild animals). The first two of these animal names (*riba* ‘fish’ and *tigrica* ‘tigress’) are exclusively related to a woman’s physical appearance, illustrated by a number of adjectives male respondents gave when asked to provide physical and/or mental characteristics of women that they would refer to by using a particular animal name. All of them belong to the semantic field [GOOD LOOKS], such as *attractive*, *pretty*, *sexy*, *seductive*. *Tigrica* ‘tigress’ is additionally used to refer to the way a woman behaves during sexual intercourse, as illustrated by the adjectives *voluptuous*, *lewd*, *lustful*, *passionate*, etc.

Lavica ‘lioness’ was selected as the term which would be used by male respondents to refer to a *strong*, *ambitious*, *persistent*, *self-confident*, and *self-sacrificing* woman, devoted to her husband and children. *Mačka* ‘cat’ obviously imparts an extremely positive evaluation as it would be used by as many as 90% of men to refer in a positive manner to an attractive and pretty woman (with such corresponding adjectives as *attractive*, *good-looking*, *seductive*, *pretty*, etc.). However, in addition to this positive use, several male respondents also indicated that they would use this animal name to refer negatively to a *dangerous*, *calculating* and *self-seeking* woman. The only animal name which would be used in a neutral manner by both men and women and which is apparently void of any evaluative stance (at least when discussed in a decontextualised manner) is *žirafa* ‘giraffe’

(used to refer to a tall woman, but not conveying any specific, either positive or negative, evaluation).

As far as negative animal metaphors are concerned, 14 animal names would be used in a negative manner by female respondents, while men would use 12 animal names for the imparting of a negative evaluation. With the exception of two animal names which men would never use to refer to a woman either in a positive or negative manner (*kobila* ‘mare’ and *slonica* ‘she elephant’), both men and women would use the same animal names to refer negatively to a woman.

Let us first consider the male choices. Five animal names would be used by approximately 50-60% of male respondents to refer negatively to a woman: *krmača* ‘sow’ (47%), *kokoška* ‘hen’ (67%), *guska* ‘goose’ (40%), *zmija* ‘snake’ (60%) and *ćurka* ‘turkey’ (53%). Out of these five terms, *krmača* ‘sow’ is used by men to refer to two apparently highly undesirable and unpopular attributes of women according to men (*obesity* and *untidiness*), as demonstrated by the provided adjectives *fat* and *sloppy*.

Kokoška ‘hen’, *guska* ‘goose’ and *ćurka* ‘turkey’ (names of domesticated, farmyard animals) are all used to describe a *stupid*, *unintelligent* woman, while *kokoška* ‘hen’ additionally connotes being *garrulous* and *chatty*, with *ćurka* ‘turkey’ being applied to a woman characterised by naivete and being easily deceived, as illustrated by the adjectives *gullible* and *credulous*. Finally, *zmija* ‘snake’ would be used by 60% of male respondents to refer exclusively negatively to a woman who is described with a whole array of adjectives such as *cunning*, *shrewd*, *dangerous*, *malicious*, *mean*, *deceitful*, *intelligent*, *astute*, *egotistic*, *selfish*, *self-centred*, *two-faced* and *greedy*, all referring to a woman’s mental attributes and character traits.

Although the same animal names are used in a negative fashion both by men and by women, women's choice of negative animal metaphors exhibits several major differences when compared to the choice of male respondents. These differences manifest themselves firstly in the percentages of the use of certain animal metaphors and secondly in the attributes which female respondents attach to a woman they refer to by using a certain animal name. Thus, *kuja* 'bitch' is used by men to refer to a playful woman who enjoys and readily engages in promiscuous sex, whereas women would use *kuja* 'bitch' to refer to a *shallow*, *conceited*, or *frivolous* woman. *Svinja* 'pig' would be used by women to refer to a fat woman, whereas men use *svinja* 'pig' metaphorically to describe an *untidy* and *sloppy* woman. *Tigrica* 'tigress', according to female respondents, metaphorically describes a *beautiful* and *attractive*, yet *dangerous* and *conceited* woman, whereas men would use the same animal name for a *sexy*, *salacious*, *lascivious* and *lustful* woman.

Several conclusions may be drawn from our small-scale analysis. First of all, a substantial majority of animal names are used by both male and female respondents to convey negative evaluations – for the purpose of semantic derogation – as opposed to those used to recall positive characteristics of women (14 animal names out of the total of 20). This implies that Serbian exhibits a particular tendency towards downgrading a specific social group that is regarded as inferior or marginal (López Rodríguez 2009:94). This choice of animal names used to refer to a woman seems not to be “arbitrary, but, on the contrary, may shed some light onto the expectations and beliefs society holds about males and females” (Nilsen 1994). The fact is, however, that there is no significant difference between

men and women in the degree of their use for semantic derogation of animal metaphors denoting women.

In addition, the names of large farmyard animals (*krava* 'cow', *krmača* 'sow' and *svinja* 'pig') usually imply fatness and ugliness as well as untidiness, whereas the names of birds belonging to a farmyard (*ćurka* 'turkey', *kokoška* 'hen', *guska* 'goose', with the exception of *patka* 'duck' evoking clumsiness) connote stupidity, naivete, carelessness, ignorance and indifference in women. The names of wild animals, on the other hand, such as *lavica* 'lioness' and *tigrica* 'tigress', imply sexually active and physically attractive women who are eager and glad to have sexual intercourse, which is usually interpreted as loose morals. A general conclusion which may be drawn from the results obtained from our questionnaire is the following: men and women use the same animal metaphors for the purpose of derogation. While they do sometimes use them to negatively evaluate different female characteristics, they still use them in semantic derogation.

6. Conclusion

The results of our small-scale study of animal metaphors as used by men and women to refer to women in Serbian should be taken as tentative, primarily due to the fact that further, more extensive and more thorough studies with different and wider sets of respondents are needed in order to arrive at conclusions which may then be generalised. Nevertheless, our results may indicate that women tend to follow linguistic patterns set by men, thus maintaining and perpetuating the metaphorical language of the group which holds a privileged position in society. This is why it is of the utmost importance to make women aware of the fact that they, by adopting the linguistic expression of their place in society as indicated by animal

metaphors, and thus supporting “linguistic discrimination” (Fontecha & Catalan 2003:772), are also perpetuating a certain way of thinking, not only a certain way of talking, since metaphors reflect the way we think. This in turn requires far-reaching changes not only in the verbal manifestation of thinking, but in the mindsets of both men and women who use animal metaphors for the purpose of semantic derogation and, indirectly, the construction of gender identity.

Acknowledgement

The paper is the result of research conducted within project no. 178002 *Languages and Cultures across Space and Time* funded by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Serbia.

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