# The Conceptual Metaphor PARENTS ARE ANIMALS: On Linguistic Terms Used Figuratively for Types of Parenting

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The aim of this paper is to provide an analysis of English animal-related terms used figuratively with reference to types of parenting. To be more precise, we make an attempt to investigate the scope of the conceptual metaphor PARENTS ARE ANIMALS. What ignited our interest was the ubiquity of linguistic metaphors featuring animal terms employed with reference to types of parenting present in everyday language, thus we have decided to delve into what types of animals are typical source domains in metaphors of this type. The methodology adopted is the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, originally proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and further developed in numerous subsequent publications, especially those by Kövecses (2003, 2005, 2010, 2015, 2017a, 2017b). Our results are supported by evidence from the online *Corpus of Contemporary American English* and *News on the Web Corpus*, which may be said to corroborate not only the conceptual nature of metaphors as such, but also their impact on social cognition.

Keywords: metaphor; mapping; parents; animals; Great Chain of Being

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# La metáfora conceptual LOS PADRES SON ANIMALES. Sobre los términos lingüísticos usados de manera figurativa en distintas formas de crianza parental

El objetivo de este trabajo es proponer un análisis de términos en inglés relacionados con animales, usados de manera figurativa con referencia a tipos de crianza. Para ser más precisos, intentamos investigar el alcance de la metáfora conceptual LOS PADRES SON ANIMALES.

Lo que despertó nuestro interés fue la omnipresencia de las metáforas lingüísticas que incluyen términos animales aplicados con referencia a las formas de crianza presentes en el lenguaje cotidiano, por lo que hemos decidido investigar qué animales son dominios fuentes típicos en las metáforas de este tipo. La metodología adoptada es la Teoría de la Metáfora Conceptual, propuesta originalmente por Lakoff y Johnson (1980), que evolucionó en varias publicaciones posteriores, especialmente las de Kövecses (2003, 2005, 2010, 2015, 2017a, 2017b). Nuestros resultados están respaldados por el *Corpus of Contemporary American English* en línea y el *News on the Web Corpus*, que corroboran no solo la naturaleza conceptual de las metáforas como tales, sino también su impacto en la cognición social.

Palabras clave: metáfora; asignación; padres; animales; la gran cadena del ser

## 1. Introduction: Problem Statement and Research Objectives

Metaphors are ubiquitous. They mirror patterns of our thinking about and conceptualization of the world that surrounds us. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the linguistic metaphors that embody, mirror and manifest conceptual metaphors can be found in every walk of life. As argued by Lakoff (1993), various cultures and languages share some basic level conceptual metaphors because they are deeply-rooted in human experience. However, it needs to be stressed that the vast majority, if not all, aspects of human experience ought to be filtered through the widely understood notion of *culture*. Given that there is a staggering number of communities, countries, tribes and ethnic groups, we can differentiate between universal and culture-specific types of experience. As a result, apart from the existence of more or less universal metaphorical expressions, there are also culture-oriented ones restricted to a given time and place.

Animal metaphors can be said to be omnipresent in world languages. The conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS stems from the fact that various attributes of human behavior may be figuratively comprehended in terms of animal behavior (Kövecses 2002, 124). It is difficult to account for how animal-based lexical items obtain their figurative meanings in isolation from culture. As put by Deignan (2003, 257), "different cultures may hold different folk beliefs about attributes of the source domain; and […] the source domain may be less salient in different cultures." Because of both geographical and cultural differences, some source domains "may not be (equally) available for metaphorical mapping in all cultures" (Boers 2003, 233).

Wierzbicka (1985, 1996) observes that people are inclined to conceptualize animals in terms of the following thematic parts: habitat, size, appearance, behavior and their relation to human beings. And while the process of conceptualization may be regarded as universal, metaphors themselves, by and large, in fact reflect cultural models. Therefore, when we juxtapose and compare metaphorical expressions in two or more languages, we observe that individuals often attribute their own cultural interpretations to explanations not found in their native language (Talebinejad and Dastjerdi 2005,

146). For example, in German, pigs symbolize luck, as suggested by the sentence *Du hast Schwein gehabt* "You have had a pig," while in Chinese culture they are a symbol of prosperity, something which was also once true of the Old English *feoh* (present-day English *fee*) "cattle," whose meaning changed to that of "a sum paid or charged for a service" (Merriam-Webster n.d., a).

Understandably, one of the driving forces behind the operation of animal metaphor—also known as zoosemy (see Kiełtyka 2016)—is culture- and belief-dependence; that is, people tend to perceive animals as possessing or at least mirroring certain negative, frequently distorted, characteristics (see Persson 1990, 169), and apply these notions to human beings they do not like, or indeed despise, or simply wish to insult, mock or ridicule.

Many animal metaphors reflect cultural models and, therefore, may—to a greater or lesser extent—be similar or different in different languages, because "although in some cases animals have similar images across cultures, [...] animal metaphors are representative of culture-specific concepts" (Talebinejad and Dastjerdi 2005, 138). However, the inter-cultural similarity may well appear higher due to the fact that such metaphors "allude to knowledge that is still shared as part of our cultural repository, but no longer directly experienced" (Deignan 2003, 270).

It is worth emphasizing that, by studying languages, not only does one delve into their internal structure, but first and foremost, one investigates the cultures, attitudes and even social consciousness of the speakers of the languages involved. It seems that an understanding of the universal phenomenon of language enables the perception of the culture-specific world we live in. In turn, the overall image of language and all the processes and mechanisms operating within it mirror our perception of the world. Various facets of animal metaphor have been researched in depth. Zoosemy-based metaphorical expressions are deeply ingrained in our beliefs, and as such one can hardly ignore the impact of culture on animal imagery. Many scholars (e.g. Talebinejad and Dastjerdi 2005; López Rodríguez 2009; Kiełtyka 2016; Matusz 2019) adopt the contrastive perspective in order to seek out and discuss similarities and differences between various languages and, as a result, cultures. It is a sweeping generalization, but it appears that many animal-oriented metaphors enable language users to describe people's negative features. While our research is not contrastive in nature, it does confirm that the imitation of animal instinctive behavior plays a significant role in forging animal-based metaphorical expressions targeted at people, including parents, as argued in what follows.

As far as the construal of animal metaphors is concerned, it can be clearly observed that the behavior of many parents, especially those living and bringing up their children in the twenty-first century, is frequently understood in terms of animal behavior. In fact, even a glance at recent websites for parents (e.g. *Today's Parent*) as well as newspaper articles (e.g. Lambert 2017), and also books (e.g. Chua 2011), shows that the animal kingdom may be a useful source of inspiration for parents. What immediately surfaces is the fact that the behavior of parents is frequently

equated with the instinctive behavior of animals. These correspondences between the human and the animal world may be couched in terms of the well-known PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS conceptual metaphor.

In what follows, we are going to focus on the metaphor PARENTS ARE ANIMALS and to discuss which animal species are typical source domains in metaphors of this type. The chief goal of our research is thus to show that animal metaphors are productive in the domain of PARENTING.

The article is organized as follows. Firstly, we briefly present the methodology, namely the cognitive framework adopted in the paper (section 2) and the way we have obtained the data for our investigation (section 3). The analysis proper (section 4) is conducted with the aid of the methodological tools offered by the Cognitive Linguistics paradigm. Lastly, the main findings and conclusions, and implications for future research, are in the final section of the paper.


## 2. The Theoretical Apparatus

The methodology adopted in this paper is based on the theory of conceptual metaphor originally proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), and developed further in a number of later publications, for example, Johnson (1987), Lakoff (1987; 1993), Grady (1997), Lakoff and Johnson (1999), Kövecses (2003; 2005; 2010; 2015; 2017a; 2017b), Goatly (2008) and Low et al. (2010). For example, as argued by Kövecses (2015, ix), "conceptual metaphors consist of sets of systematic correspondences, or mappings between two domains of experience and […] the meaning of a particular metaphorical expression realizing an underlying conceptual metaphor is based on such correspondences."

In this paper we touch upon the problem of the so-called dehumanizing metaphor, whose chief purpose is to manipulate people and, as a result, exercise an influence on their viewpoint (Costello 2012; Costello and Hodson 2014; Prażmo 2019; Prażmo and Augustyn 2020). People are inclined to employ various metaphorical expressions with reference to certain groups of people (e.g. parents, the unmarried, the disabled) and thus affect perceptions of those who belong to these groups. Language users often resort to using lexical items whose sense is connected with flora and fauna or inanimate imagery when they want to derogate or humiliate someone, this resulting from the deep-seated and widely held belief that human beings are superior to animals and plants.

Indeed, the position of human beings in the Great Chain of Being may be said to be advantaged, especially when compared to other living creatures. In fact, we are positioned in the middle of *scala naturae*, acknowledging only the superiority of God and angelic beings. Beneath us are animals, plants, and minerals (Lakoff and Turner 1989; Krzeszowski 1997; Rigato and Minelli 2013). The idea of the Great Chain of Being, which runs through the whole gamut of matter and life, stems from ancient Greek philosophy. As Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez observes (2003, 111):

[I]t is a cultural model defined by attributes and behavior which typically apply to each form of being (humans, animals, plants, complex objects, and natural physical things) in a hierarchy. [...] The GENERIC IS SPECIFIC metaphor singles out common generic structure from specific concepts. The combination of the two models allows us to understand animal behavior in terms of human character. For example, we believe that lions, like humans, are courageous. The people are animals mapping, on the other hand, makes us understand human character in terms of animal behavior.

Living organisms have been employed as source domains in various metaphorical expressions. As observed by Prażmo and Augustyn (2020, 152), the HUMAN BEING IS AN ANIMAL metaphor is quite controversial given its "twofold evaluative potential." One can find numerous examples of metaphorical expressions whose aim is to debase and stigmatize certain groups of humans by juxtaposing them with animals, as in the case of ethnic groups linguistically portrayed on various occasions as *insects*, *parasites* or *wild animals*. The IMMIGRANTS ARE PARASITES metaphor discussed by Musolff (2012) serves as a striking example of the denigration of the Turkish minority in Germany, not to mention the recent migration movement from Africa and the Middle East. However, there are also numerous examples of metaphorical expressions that upgrade human beings by comparing them to some animals. In this connection, one can allude to the ACHILLES IS A LION metaphor which projects onto the target domain such positively-loaded features as strength and courage (Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez 2003, 111; Prażmo and Augustyn 2020, 151).

## 3. Data Collection

All the targeted terms in this work are relatively recent, many of them having appeared or achieved currency during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Some but not all of them have been listed in dictionaries of contemporary English, such as the *Cambridge Dictionary* (n.d.) and *Longman Dictionary* (n.d.). Their frequency of use is confirmed by the data obtained from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA, n.d.) and the *News on the Web* (NOW, n.d.) Corpus, and is presented in table 1. The difference between the frequency distribution of the data from the two corpora shown in table 1 clearly indicates that in the majority of cases, the analyzed phrases appear more frequently in web-based newspapers and magazines collected by the NOW Corpus than in the texts the COCA Corpus is based on (mainly fiction, popular magazines, newspapers and academic texts). In turn, the Google search engine shows that the most productive animal-based terms used for types of parenting are *tiger parenting* (130 million hits), *elephant parenting* (56.7 million hits), *dolphin parenting* (36.3 million hits), and *jellyfish parenting* (5.55 million hits).

TABLE 1. Frequency of Occurrence of the Analyzed Animal-Based Terms in COCA

| Animal term | Frequency of occurrence in COCA and NOW |
|---|---|
| *tiger mother* | 49 contexts (459 in NOW Corpus) |
| *tiger parenting* | 1 context (117 in NOW Corpus) |
| *tiger parents* | 3 contexts (140 in NOW Corpus) |
| *jellyfish mother* | No matching contexts |
| *jellyfish parenting* | No matching contexts (0 in NOW Corpus) |
| *jellyfish parents* | 4 contexts (8 in NOW Corpus) |
| *dolphin mother* | 2 contexts (11 in NOW Corpus) |
| *dolphin parenting* | No matching contexts (3 in NOW Corpus) |
| *dolphin parents* | 5 contexts (12 in NOW Corpus) |
| *elephant mother* | 3 contexts (23 in NOW Corpus) |
| *elephant parenting* | 1 context (0 in NOW Corpus) |
| *elephant parents* | No matching contexts (2 in NOW Corpus) |

In order to search for the occurrences of the animal terms discussed in this paper, we have examined two corpora (COCA and NOW Corpus), a number of magazine and journal articles (e.g. Kim 2013; Doan et al. 2017), and books on parenting styles (e.g. Lythcott-Haims 2015).

## 4. DATA ANALYSIS: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Let us commence the discussion with a brief definition of the general term *parenting* which encompasses not only rearing children but also all the activities connected with it. As stressed by Sooriya (2017, 1), by and large, the notion refers to the way we decide to raise our offspring, whether we are lenient towards them, or, on the contrary, restrictive and rigorous. It is our children's behavior that shows us whether our methods and approaches have been appropriate and successful or not. We might say that in many cases parenting pivots on exerting various levels of control over children and that some adults may find it difficult to exercise restraint in this respect.

In psychology, parenting styles were classified by Baumrind (1967, 1991, 2012), who distinguished three approaches, namely, a) *authoritative*—parents are warm and supportive, they establish clear rules and expect a lot from their children; b) *authoritarian*—parents develop stringent rules and want their children to be totally obedient, parents are unresponsive; and c) *permissive*—*p*arents are indulgent, responsive and warm, they rarely issue any rules. She observed that different types of upbringing had an influence on pre-schoolers' behavior. Her theory was then supplemented by

Maccoby and Martin (1983), who added the additional label of *neglectful*—parents are cold and indifferent, they fail to involve themselves in nurturing the child, there are no rules that children should follow. It is worth mentioning that the metaphorical expressions under scrutiny in this work are based on the aforementioned styles, thus the definitions and descriptions are taken from parenting blogs and magazines.

As far as the realm of animals is concerned, three styles of parenting seem to prevail: a) authoritarian *tiger parenting*—the term was coined by Chua in 2011; b) permissive *jellyfish parenting*; and c) authoritative *dolphin parenting*—both terms were introduced by Kang (2014a, 2014b).

## 4.1. Animal-Based Parenting Approaches

*Tiger mother/parenting* is a term employed with reference to parents who force their children to work hard in order to be successful, according to the *Cambridge Dictionary*. It is a very stern and exigent form of bringing up progeny. Employing authoritarian parenting methods, mothers and/or fathers exert pressure on their children to obtain the best results in school and to participate in extracurricular activities (Kim 2013). Consequently, with a certain amount of sacrifice, children manage to complete their studies and attain success. In this connection, we may formulate the HARSH AND DEMANDING PARENTS ARE TIGERS metaphor.

As the data obtained from the *Oxford English Dictionary* illustrate, the term *tiger mother* was in use in English in the first decade of the twentieth century; however, it was the publication by Chua (2011) that led to its currency in the twenty-first century. Chua (2011) argues that children who are not granted permission to do what they want and are instead obliged to obey certain rules are highly successful. Such parenting is part of Chua's Chinese heritage: in East, South and Southeast Asia strict upbringing is a common phenomenon (Lyu 2017). In Chinese society, children obtaining a higher education qualification is of great importance to parents, and a number of families do their utmost to instill a sense of duty in their offspring. It is such a vital issue and priority because well-rounded education is associated with high socioeconomic status, and, as such, children living up to parental expectations is something which is deeply ingrained in Asian culture (Chen and Huttal 1988, 351-58). Consider the following quotations extracted from the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

(1) 1907 E. FREMANTLE *Comrades Two* 237 I spent all last night on my knees, beseeching the Great Physician to heal my boy [...]. The instinct of the **tiger-mother**[1] is tearing my heart to pieces.

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[1] Bold added.

(2) 1975 S. BELLOW *Humboldt's Gift* 151 She was in her busy mood, domineering and protecting me [...]. 'Where you're concerned,' she would say, 'I'm a **tiger-mother** and a regular Fury.'

(3) 1998 *Sydney Morning Herald* (Nexis) 2 May (Good Weekend section) 45 The **tiger mother** in Danielle decides Clementine must go back to school in the new term.

(4) 2005 *New Statesman* 9 May 28/2 The '**tiger mothers**' of Holland Park and Hampstead determined to set their three-year-olds on the path to Oxbridge, whatever the human cost.

(5) 2015 G. TSOLIDIS in *F. Mansouri Cultural*, *Relig. & Polit. Contestations* viii. 126 This image of Asian students as over-zealous has been fed most recently by the publicity given to the notion of the '**Tiger Mother**' after the publication of Chua's book.

As far as the origin of the term is concerned, its roots can be traced back to Chinese philosophy. Schuman (2015) argues that it was Confucius who was the advocate of the hard work that was crucial to the pursuit of knowledge. Thus, the devotion of time to learning, respect for one's parents and honesty propagated by the ancient philosopher were supposed to ensure a prosperous life.

There are many differences between the Western and Chinese approaches to parenting. While the former may be said to be lenient and liberal, the latter is strict and exacting. Chinese parents are of the opinion that it is part of their job to instill a sense of duty in their children. Those who are not afraid of hard work and are good at mathematics and science are prepared for a prosperous future. In fact, then, following a parenting approach that seems to be controversial in Europe and America turns out to be desirable in some parts of Asia.

According to Chua (2011), tiger parents always give priority to schoolwork, and their choices are dictated by the potential rewards which will allow their children to work their way up the career ladder. Zhong (2011) adds that being good is not enough, parents strive for their children to achieve educational excellence. Furthermore, they pay meticulous attention to science, as studying arts is less prestigious. However, as noted by Rende (2012), Chinese children also devote a lot of time to playing classical music, which is also perceived as important. Apart from dedication to science and classical music, children are taught competitiveness in sport. Some may say that such a way of bringing up children may result from a lack of love, but it is quite the contrary; Chinese parents believe that the more demanding they are, the more they love their children. While Chinese parents attempt to inculcate diligence in their children and believe that strict parenting is a reflection of their love, Western parents are rather skeptical about the Confucian value system, which may be a source of stress for children (Chen and Huttal 1988).

We can speak about two types of control exerted on children, namely psychological and behavioral. As far as the psychological aspects of tiger parenting are concerned, we

might say that, in comparison to other types of parenting, as part of their strategy, tiger parents are inclined to be reserved and manipulative. Instead of showing love, they adopt another tactic, which is the induction of a feeling of guilt in their child. In turn, the aim of behavioral control is to restrict a child's freedom insofar as they participate only in selected extracurricular activities, which parents consider will limit or even eliminate potential behavioral problems (Doan et al. 2017). The approach to learning in East Asian countries is very exam-oriented and the aim is for the child to attain the best results. Rote learning and accuracy seem to be praised, whereas autonomy and individualism are eschewed.

Tiger parents genuinely believe that their methods will provide their children with the best start in adult life. Nevertheless, some of them seem to ignore the fact that not every child is gifted and that attempting to meet high parental expectations may result in anxiety. Moreover, there are a number of social skills or so-called soft skills connected with emotional intelligence which are disregarded by parents. The pursuit of educational success at the expense of pleasure is what distinguishes this type of upbringing from the others. Children's needs, interests, passions or talents are ignored if they fail to match their parents' expectations. Very young people thus learn to eschew any temptations.

The opponents and critics of this method claim that it destroys creativity and freedom of choice, and therefore young people do not really know what they are good at and cannot discover their talents. In turn, supporters claim that the approach in question develops such personality traits as, for example, self-discipline and self-control. Moreover, as emphasized by Li (2001), we will not succeed unless we put all our efforts into learning.

In nature, the role of mothers is substantial, for example, a tigress must protect her cubs not only from predators but also from males, which may even kill her offspring, thus bringing the female into heat, enabling the male to mate with her. The young stay under their mother's protective vigilance until they are eight weeks old and during that time they fully depend on her. Cubs develop skills like speed and agility through play fighting with each other. Tigresses are known to be vehement protectors as far as keeping their offspring safe is concerned.[2]

Let us consider five (out of 487 detected) exemplary contexts obtained from the NOW Corpus in which the metaphorical use of the term *tiger mother* was identified:

(6) "During a press conference for Disney and Pixar's Turning Red earlier this month, Canadian-American actress Sandra Oh revealed a 'tiger mum' experience that still haunts her." (Extracted from: https://www.asiaone.com/entertainment/sandra-oh-tiger-mum-love-her-more-if-she-neater-turning-red-disney-pixar-domee-shi)

(7) "There's glamorous Mum – the lovely Caitriona Balfe– who has two roles. She's the fierce Celtic Tiger Mother, who'll do anything for her two boys, Buddy and Will, and she's the loyal wife." (Morris 2022)

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[2]  See *Tigers-World* (2014).

(8) "'My mother was extremely controlled, sort of flawless. And I always tend to be a bit more hippie. She was a Tiger Mother [...]. But she really tried to encourage me to be who I was. I don't live through my kids. But I do know what will happen in life, and I just want them well prepared', she explained." (Ross 2022)

(9) "But you can't say that to a 12-year-old child, can you? Not when you are the mother, the Tiger Mother whose job on this earth is to protect that child." (Llewellyn 2022)

(10) "Uhmma, as Hodges refers to her mother, using the Korean term, cast herself as a 'rocket booster': there to help her sons and daughters launch. But she comes off as an absolute rock, battered by prejudice and stereotypes, like the Tiger Mother style of parenting promulgated by the writer and law professor Amy Chua, who is Chinese American." (Extracted from: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/28/books/review-uncommon-measure-natalie-hodges.html)

The analysis of the contexts provided by the corpus shows that the term *tiger mother* is a frequently used metaphorical expression (487 cases detected). It appears both in Asian online press articles and Western newspaper and magazine websites such as the *Daily Star*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the *New Yorker*, and the *New York Magazine*.

The metaphorical schema HARSH AND DEMANDING PARENTS ARE TIGERS is presented in table 2.

TABLE 2. The HARSH AND DEMANDING PARENTS ARE TIGERS Metaphor

| Source domain: TIGERS | Target domain: DEMANDING PARENTS |
|---|---|
| are vehement protectors of their young | are committed/devoted protectors of their children |
| protect their cubs from predators | care too much for their children |
| young tigers stay under their mother's protective vigilance until they are eight weeks old | exert absolute control over their children |
| force their cubs to follow them closely | force their children to work hard in order to be successful |
| young tigers fully depend on their mothers | children obey their parents' orders |
| being protected by their mothers, cubs develop skills like speed or agility through play fighting with each other | believe that their protective methods will provide their children with the best start in adult life |

In this case, referring to tiger parenting serves as a concealing mechanism to talk about a specific type of child rearing, which is depicted as a harsh and demanding

activity. In terms of the theoretical framework adopted here, we can say that the conceptual domain TIGERS presupposes a number of entailments, including BEING VEHEMENT, PROTECTIVE, CARING, etc. All in all, taking into consideration the mappings listed in table 2, we can formulate the HARSH AND DEMANDING PARENTS ARE TIGERS metaphor. The motivation behind the figurative use of the concept of *tiger parenting* seems to be determined by the fact that a demanding child rearing approach is very often compared to that typical of the targeted animal. Both parents and tigers may be viewed as protective and caring; they also want their children to fully depend on them and obey their orders. As noted by many linguists (see, for example, Kövecses 2002, 17; Grząśko and Kiełtyka 2021), ANIMAL metaphors are ubiquitous and productive cross-linguistically to a considerable extent, and they may concentrate on and emphasize several human properties couched in animal terms. On the one hand, the application of animal-specific elements to human beings is aimed at gaining a better understanding of human behavior and the parental way of thinking— being overprotective and demanding, enforcing absolute obedience—by referring to animal instinctive behavior (e.g. forcing cubs to follow their mothers closely); but, on the other hand, it may degrade and dehumanize the people targeted. In this case, both tigers and tiger parents concentrate on protection and obedience directed at their progeny. However, understanding human behavior and other features in terms of those that are characteristic of animals, which are placed lower than people in the Great Chain of Being, is frequently conceived of as an act of dehumanization and derogation of the human in question.

*Jellyfish parents* are the exact opposite of *tiger parents*. While the latter, as we have seen, is dominated by absolute parental control exerted over children, the former is distinguished by a complete lack of such control, therefore, in terms of the cognitively-couched model of analysis adopted here, we may formulate the LENIENT AND PERMISSIVE PARENTS ARE JELLYFISH metaphor. Jellyfish parents grant their children autonomy at a relatively young age, whereas tiger parents inadvertently hinder their children's independence and freedom. Jellyfish parents are inclined not to instruct their offspring, thus adolescents may not see any specified aims or purposes in life. In turn, people brought up by tiger parents have to obey many instructions and, as a result, they may have problems solving life problems themselves. In the case of tiger parents, their definition of success for their children is very rigid and financially-oriented. Permissive parents, on the other hand, impose few rules on their children, who are consequently not good at assuming responsibility for the consequences of their behavior. There are no explicit goals and no clear expectations.

Given that children of tiger parents live under constant pressure and children of jellyfish parents do not have to handle any parental pressure at all, we may conclude that both modes of upbringing can harm young people. It may seem that tiger parents care too much, while jellyfish parents are too liberal with their children. Both approaches are extreme examples of methods of raising children.

Jorgensen (2021) has pointed out that, as far as the breeding habits of jellyfish are concerned, they do not have much interaction with their offspring, especially the males of box jellyfish. Briefly, jellyfish reproduce once a year: males either fertilize the eggs inside the female or release sperm into the water where females have released their eggs. When the eggs are fertilized, they form planulae either in the female's body or in the water. Once fertilization has occurred, jellyfish males do not attend to their young. Interestingly, the majority of adult animals die shortly after the process of fertilization. Before the planulae land on the ocean bed, they float on the water for a few days. We put forward a hypothesis that in this particular case language aptly mirrors the human conceptualization of nature in that permissive parents, who give their children too much autonomy, leave their offspring to their own devices in a similar way to the planulae which are left without any parental care.

The NOW Corpus provides us with eight cases of the use of the term *jellyfish parents*. Five of them are reproduced below.

(11) "**Jellyfish parents** acquire that description because they seem to lack backbone. They don't establish or enforce rules for their kids, they set low or no expectations for performance and they don't enforce consequences." (Keiran 2017)

(12) "You're a jellyfish. Like the sea creature, your family's structure is shapeless. As parents you're indifferent and let your children do whatever they want. **Jellyfish parents** are unlikely to set rules or boundaries, meaning children often have poor social skills, a lack of self-control and little or no respect. They are more like a 'friend' than a parent and leave children to make their own decisions." (Pietras 2014)

(13) "You're a dolphin. Like the mammal, you're loving and playful. They are the balance between tiger parents and **jellyfish parents**. A dolphin parents (*sic*) has rules and expectations but they also put value on children having a choice to maintain that balance. You value creativity and independence." (Pietras 2014)

(14) "On the other extreme, permissive **jellyfish parents** lack rules, discipline, and expectations. Children of **jellyfish parents** may turn to peers for guidance and fail to develop self-control. They are at higher risk of poor social skills, risk-taking behaviours, and substance abuse. Many modern parents flip-flop between Tiger and Jellyfish leaving their child with no consistent message." (Kang 2014c)

(15) "**Jellyfish parents** say 'what problem?' Backbone parents recognize that if it's severe, if it's a situation that you're really unsure of, get help. They know it's a healthy thing to get help outside the family to get through the rough times, that you don't have to do this alone." (Gordon 2010)

The metaphorical schema LENIENT AND PERMISSIVE PARENTS ARE JELLYFISH is presented graphically in table 3.

TABLE 3. The LENIENT AND PERMISSIVE PARENTS ARE JELLYFISH Metaphor

| Source domain: JELLYFISH | Target domain: PERMISSIVE PARENTS |
|---|---|
| do not have much interaction with their offspring, many species die after the fertilisation process occurs | do not protect their children, there are no goals or expectations |
| do not protect their offspring from predators the planulae float on the water without any protection | give children too much autonomy at a relatively young age |
| males do not attend to their young after the eggs are fertilized, they are passive and indifferent | exert little or no control over their children |

Referring to jellyfish parenting is an example of using a concealing mechanism in order to describe a particular mode of upbringing characterized by parents' liberal attitude towards their offspring. In cognitive terms, we may assume that the source domain JELLYFISH presupposes such negatively-loaded entailments as PASSIVE, INDIFFERENT or UNINTERESTED. On the basis of the mappings listed in table 3, we may construe the LENIENT AND PERMISSIVE PARENTS ARE JELLYFISH metaphor.

There are different types of mothers and parents, both in the realm of animals and among human beings, thus it is not surprising that we find some similarities shared by different species and people. If one can find a protective mother among animals, one can search for its antithesis as well. The motivation behind the figurative use of the concept of jellyfish parenting may be determined by the fact that both jellyfish and some human parents limit the role of parenting to only conceiving or giving birth to their offspring. The term *jellyfish parents* may be said to dehumanize people who are neglectful of their parental duties.

Importantly, we need to bear in mind that it is only our belief that a jellyfish is not a good mother. While there are theories concerning the way humans should raise children, we must acknowledge the fact that nature has its own rules, which ought not to be criticized or violated by people. In all likelihood, for jellyfish abandoning offspring as soon as they begin to develop is a good thing. However, from the perspective of human beings, good parents should take care of their children, therefore some may be surprised that there are species that leave their offspring to their own fate or, even worse, commit infanticide, as in the case of a magpie that pecks a chick to death or a stork that eliminates the weakest nestling (Mikołuszko 2017). More or less unconsciously, human beings reproduce behavioral patterns that already exist in nature.

In comparison to the tiger and jellyfish modes of upbringing, *dolphin parenting* seems to be the most reasonable solution to child rearing. This particular type of nurturing is described by Kang (2014a), who believes that an authoritative approach to raising children allows them to enjoy a healthy lifestyle in the future. Dolphin parents stress the importance of long-term skills which are valued in the 21st century, such as creativity, critical thinking and communication skills. This portrayal of the dolphin parenting style may be couched in terms of the REASONABLE AND SUPPORTIVE PARENTS ARE DOLPHINS metaphor. It follows from the parenting mode in question that parents ought to be both resolute and flexible, they need to strike a balance between imposing some hard and fast rules on the one hand and valuing a child's high degree of autonomy on the other. Merriam-Webster (n.d., b) defines the approach thus: "The dolphin parent is [...] authoritative in nature. Like the body of the dolphin, they are firm yet flexible. Dolphin parents have rules and expectations but also value creativity and independence. They are collaborative and use guiding and role modeling to raise their kids."[3]

As argued by Kang (2014a), dolphin parents pay attention to their children's education, but also avoid the overscheduling that may have a detrimental effect on their offspring. In the dolphin parenting style, a child's autonomy increases with age. Young people are allowed to make their own decisions, for example, if they are willing to participate in some extracurricular activities they can, but otherwise will not be obliged to do so. Likewise, adolescents are encouraged to discover and develop their passions and not to simply meet their parents' expectations. Dolphin mothers are supportive and caring, which means that they allow their children to be independent and, if need be, they guard their offspring from considerable harm. Nevertheless, mothers are not overprotective and they are aware that people learn from their own mistakes.

Dolphins are social mammals and they attend to their calves for 3-6 years. During that time their offspring are believed to acquire new skills and abilities through play; they watch their parents' movements and learn how to survive. Mothers are protective, but they allow their calves to explore the world.[4]

The NOW Corpus lists twelve occurrences of the linguistic metaphor *dolphin parents*, five of which are reproduced below.

(16) "You're a dolphin. Like the mammal, you're loving and playful. They are the balance between tiger parents and jellyfish parents. A **dolphin parents** (*sic*) has rules and expectations but they also put value on children having a choice to maintain that balance. You value creativity and independence." (Pietras 2014)

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[3]  See Merriam-Webster (n.d., b).
[4]  Sea World Parks and Entertainment.

(17) "Thankfully, **dolphin parents** (as opposed to hyper-competitive tiger parents, or directionless jellyfish parents) teach their children that individual satisfaction depends not only on their quality of life but also on that of others. We are built to connect socially, care about our community and strive to make the world a better place." (Kang 2014d)

(18) "**Dolphin parents** are not authoritarian pushing parents or hovering tiger parents (who stifle internal motivation) nor are we permissive spineless jellyfish (who fail to cultivate impulse control), we recognize we are authority figures and use guidance, role modelling, and a balanced lifestyle to ensure the development of internal motivation, impulse control, and independence." (Kang 2014c)

(19) "**Dolphin parents** have the highest of expectations for our children and intend to guide them towards health, happiness, and a balanced life with meaning and purpose." (Kang 2014c)

(20) "Dolphin mothers benefit from complex social relationships with other **dolphin parents** that give us relief from the backbreaking labor of child-rearing while also teaching us new ways to guide our children's development." (Christakis 2011)

The metaphorical schema REASONABLE AND SUPPORTIVE PARENTS ARE DOLPHINS is presented graphically in table 4.

TABLE 4. The REASONABLE AND SUPPORTIVE PARENTS ARE DOLPHINS Metaphor

| Source domain:<br>DOLPHINS | Target domain:<br>SUPPORTIVE PARENTS |
| --- | --- |
| mothers are protective, but they allow their offspring to explore the world | mothers are resolute,<br>they set rules, but they also allow their children to make decisions |
| calves acquire new skills through play | parents give their children some autonomy |
| offspring watch parents' movements and learn from them | parents pay attention to education, but avoid overscheduling |
| social mammals | children are allowed to play, communication skills are important |

The most rational and balanced approach to parenting can be figuratively labeled as dolphin parenting. If one attempts to find the middle ground between the extreme forms of rearing children, namely tiger parenting and jellyfish parenting, the dolphin parents' approach is the answer. Within the methodological framework adopted in this paper we postulate the construal of the human-specific sense of the term *dolphin parents*

that presupposes such positively-loaded entailments as PROTECTIVE, HELPFUL, SUPPORTIVE and REASONABLE. The Western perception of sensible parenthood is that parents should give their children unconditional love and ensure their safety. Kang (2014a) claims that dolphins share a number of emotional similarities with people, which justifies her choice of this particular mammal to describe this type of parenting. Dolphins' young are similar to humans' babies in that neither can fend for themselves until quite long after birth. They need to learn important skills, and it is their mothers that, generally in the case of humans, provide their first lessons.

The term *elephant parenting* was introduced by Sharma-Sindhar in 2014. Since it is employed with reference to understanding and loving parents, it is yet another antonym of tiger parenting. Elephant mothers/fathers allow their children to follow their own path and make their own choices. Such parents are neither demanding nor strict. Instead, they prefer to be responsive and helpful.[5] In a similar way to elephants, this type of parent believe that it is crucial to protect their offspring, especially at a very young age, and encourage them to learn new things. Children are never left alone without any support, thus they have a constant sense of security provided by their parents.[6]

The perception of elephant parents as sensitive and protective people seems to be motivated by the working of the SENSITIVE AND PROTECTIVE PARENTS ARE ELEPHANTS metaphor. They are aware that a child's emotional growth cannot be neglected: "An elephant parent is relaxed about their child's academic achievement or sporting prowess. Instead, they prize emotional security and connection. In common with attachment parenting, they may favor physical closeness as well" (Merriam-Webster n.d., b). Mothers are known for being protective, the gestation period is quite long (18 to 22 months) and after the calf's birth, females take care of their young, while males choose a solitary life. In fact, elephants form a family group which consists of female cows and their young (Hernández 2019), the youngest never being left at the back of the herd. Moreover, other members of the group adopt a calf if it becomes an orphan. What is particularly intriguing is the fact that elephant mothers mourn for their deceased offspring, as well as that of other elephants, for a long time. One of their innate habits is to prepare an interment by covering the carcass with leaves and twigs. Their instinct is so strong that even after many years elephants revisit the burial site, which makes them quite an unusual species (see Sargent 2021).

The search of the NOW Corpus revealed 23 instances of metaphorical use of the term *elephant parent*. Five of them are reproduced below:

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5   *Times of India* (2020).
6   Parenting Desk (2020).

(21) "If you're wondering what '**elephant parent**' means, it's the kind of parent who does the exact opposite of what the tiger mom, the ultra-strict disciplinarian, does." (Sharma-Sindhar 2014)

(22) "Unlike the tiger parent, who uses authoritarian methods, **elephant parents** are known to be a little softer – emphasizing emotional protection, as well as encouragement." (Pelletiere 2018)

(23) "An **elephant parent** is nurturing and protective of their child, especially when they are very young. They are more relaxed when it comes to achievement in the classroom and on the sports field, allowing their child more freedom to choose what they want to do rather than requiring them to follow strict rules and guidelines. Elephant parenting places emphasis on the emotional bond between a child and his or her parents, encouraging children to be themselves, providing comfort and support where needed." (Twinkl n.d.)

(24) "An elephant mom is one of the many groups that parents can be classified as. Like their namesake in the animal kingdom, an **elephant parent** is very nurturing and protective of her (*sic*) offspring, especially in the earliest stages of their life." (Stauffer 2021)

(25) "**Elephant parent**: as close to the opposite of a tiger parent as possible, these kinds of parents value emotional security and connection. Like their namesake in the animal kingdom, an 'elephant mom' is very nurturing and protective of her offspring, especially in the earliest stages of their life. Independent sleeping may not occur until children are 5 years old. These parents seek not to raise their voices and value encouragement over academic or athletic success." (Netlingo n.d.)

The metaphorical schema SENSITIVE AND PROTECTIVE PARENTS ARE ELEPHANTS is presented in table 5.

TABLE 5. The SENSITIVE AND PROTECTIVE PARENTS ARE ELEPHANTS Metaphor

| Source domain: ELEPHANTS | Target domain: SENSITIVE AND PROTECTIVE PARENTS |
| --- | --- |
| protective | children are never left without any help |
| loving | children know that they can rely on their parents |
| involved | children are encouraged to learn new things |
| supportive | children are allowed to make their own choices and follow their own path |

It seems that we are, then, justified in speculating that the cognitive basis behind this particular choice of animal is connected with the fact that elephant mothers are regarded as being among the most caring. The construal of the human-specific sense of the term in question involves the highlighting of such positively-loaded conceptual elements as UNDERSTANDING, SUPPORTIVE, LOVING and CARING. One of the aspects that may have contributed to the choice of this particular animal to describe a perfect mother is female elephants' bewailing the departed, which makes them seem almost human-like beings. While there are many animals that eliminate the weakest offspring or simply abandon it (e.g. harp seals, cuckoos, eagles), elephant mothers are likely to carry it on their tusks.

Safina (2015) stresses that apart from helping sick new-borns, elephant mothers also tend to carry dead infants. Similar practices have been observed among apes, baboons and dolphins. Interestingly, neither elephants nor dolphins carry healthy infants. It is difficult to say whether animals do actually grieve as it would run the risk of anthropomorphizing them. On the other hand, we cannot attribute the feeling of bewailing only to human beings. One can hardly ignore the fact that people and animals share some features to some degree (e.g. social skills, communication, cognition, intelligence). For example, both dolphins and elephants are highly intelligent social mammals. Elephant females forge very strong relationships between the members of a herd, and in this respect, paying recurrent visits to burial sites indicates that these animals may experience advanced feelings. In all likelihood, their habits serve some social or biological purpose (Cross 2020).

## 5. Conclusion and Implications for Future Research

In this paper, an attempt has been made to show that representatives of the animal kingdom are frequent sources of conceptual metaphors targeted at the domain of HUMAN PARENTING. The common mappings that may be established between the source and target domains are collected in table 6.

Table 6. The PARENTS ARE ANIMALS Metaphor

| Source domain: ANIMALS | Target domain: PARENTS |
|---|---|
| watchful | protective |
| instinctive | controlling |

Judging by the fact that there are many types of parenting in the realm of animals, it is an arduous task to provide a homogeneous picture of parenthood. What all the analyzed species have in common is that they are driven by instincts, thus one can hardly judge

their behavior. Nevertheless, one may speculate as to whether being overprotective is a positive or negative feature of parenting. We need to stress at this juncture that according to controlling parents, their methods prove that they do love their children.

As far as axiological issues are concerned, it seems justified to argue that, since the conceptual metaphor PARENTS ARE ANIMALS contains source domains that occupy lower levels in the Great Chain of Being than the target domains, equating human beings with animals may degrade and dehumanize the targeted parents. However, the perception of the source domain ANIMALS is far more complex. True enough, the metaphor LENIENT AND PERMISSIVE PARENTS ARE JELLYFISH and HARSH AND DEMANDING PARENTS ARE TIGERS may be viewed as axiologically negative, especially in Western societies. In turn, for the Chinese, the concept of *tiger parenting* is part and parcel of their cultural heritage and consequently, the metaphor HARSH AND DEMANDING PARENTS ARE TIGERS is by no means negative, quite the opposite, it embodies a desirable model of child rearing in this particular culture. As for dolphin and elephant parenting styles, which are motivated by the conceptual metaphors REASONABLE AND SUPPORTIVE PARENTS ARE DOLPHINS and SENSITIVE AND PROTECTIVE PARENTS ARE ELEPHANTS, one may argue that their axiology is dichotomous. On the one hand, equating people with animals may be a sign of dehumanization and derogation, but on the other hand, a number of instinctive characteristics and properties typical of these mammals, such as their human-like protection and care towards their young, are highlighted and foregrounded on the human level of the Great Chain of Being. One may therefore venture a claim that, judging by their complex nature and opposing attitudes to them in Western and Eastern societies, it would be virtually impossible to characterize all the metaphors subject to analysis in this paper as unambiguously positive or negative. What can, however, be confirmed is that at least some of the metaphors are universal in many societies and languages, while the axiology of others (e.g. HARSH AND DEMANDING PARENTS ARE TIGERS) is culture-specific (positive in China, negative in Western cultures). Finally, one may feel justified in saying that some of the metaphors investigated in the paper, especially the LENIENT AND PERMISSIVE PARENTS ARE JELLYFISH metaphor, are meant to stigmatize incorrect or at least questionable approaches to parenting.

Another important issue is the frequency of the targeted metaphors. In this respect one may argue that the productivity of the analyzed conceptual metaphors is relatively high, which is corroborated by the frequency of occurrence of the parenting styles terms they motivate. The four most common animal-related terms discussed in this study are commonly used, especially in online publications (blogs and magazine and journal articles), which is easily verifiable through Internet search engines. For example, as mentioned earlier, the Google search engine[7] shows that among the most

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[7] Specific numbers of hits are mentioned in section 3.

productive animal-based terms used for types of parenting are *tiger parenting*, *elephant parenting*, *dolphin parenting* and *jellyfish parenting*. The relatively high productivity of the terms may be said to corroborate not only the conceptual and universal nature of metaphors as such, but also their impact on social cognition. Inspired by Kövecses (2017b, 215), we believe that the action of the mechanism described in Conceptual Metaphor Theory may be evidenced at all levels of linguistic description, while its "important contribution to connecting mind with the body, language with culture, body with culture, and language with the brain" cannot be underestimated.

As far as future vistas are concerned, it might be worthwhile considering why certain terms are more prone to being possible candidates as source domains and to what extent the choice of specific metaphors mirrors changes taking place in the minds of language users.

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