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Natural Gender and Cultural Cognition in Albanian Animal Idioms: How Male-Female Animal Pairs Structure Figurative Meaning

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Abstract

This study examines approximately 150 Albanian idiomatic expressions derived from animal terms, with a particular focus on how natural gender functions as a structuring principle in the formation of figurative meaning. Drawing on material from *Fjalori frazeologjik i gjuhës shqipe* (1999) ("Phraseological Dictionary of the Albanian Language") and *Fjalori i gjuhës së sotme shqipe* (1980) ("Dictionary of Contemporary Albanian"), the analysis investigates how the physical traits and behavioral patterns of animals motivate idiomatic extensions to human character, social roles, and moral evaluation. The central aim is to explore the semantic divergences that emerge between idioms formed with male and female animal names, and to show how these divergences reflect culturally embedded conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity. Methodologically, the study applies qualitative semantic analysis informed by cognitive linguistics and cultural linguistics. The idioms are organized into paired lexical sets, *pulë (hen) - gjel (rooster)*, *dele (ewe) - dash (ram)*, *dhi (goat) - cjan (billy goat)*, *lopë (cow) - viç (calf)/ka (bull)/qe (oxen)*, *kalë (horse) - pelë (mare)*, *mace (cat) - maçok (tomcat)*, which allow for a systematic comparison of shared features, motivational imagery, and evaluative orientations. The findings indicate that male animal idioms typically foreground agency, strength, assertiveness, or risk, whereas female animal idioms emphasize vulnerability, domesticity, emotional sensitivity, or economic burden. These patterns reflect not merely biological characteristics but culturally transmitted symbolic codes embedded in Albanian pastoral life. The results demonstrate that Albanian animal-based phraseology functions as a dense repository of cultural cognition, where gender distinctions are reproduced, reinforced, and naturalized through everyday language use. By revealing the semantic asymmetries across male-female pairs, the study contributes to broader discussions on the cultural grounding of idioms and the ways in which linguistic structures encode social hierarchies, behavioral expectations, and gendered moral evaluations. The analysis highlights the value of phraseology as a site where language, culture, and cognition intersect, offering insights into how traditional ecological knowledge continues to shape contemporary figurative language.

Keywords: Albanian phraseology, animal idioms, natural gender, cultural conceptualizations, cognitive linguistics, semantic motivation, figurative language.

1. Introduction

Animal-based idioms represent one of the most productive and culturally revealing domains of Albanian phraseology. Because animal husbandry has historically been integral to Albanian rural life, animals have served not only as economic resources but also as symbolic templates for evaluating human behavior, emotions, and social roles. In this sense, idioms referring to animals are not arbitrary figurative units; they preserve cultural knowledge, behavioral observations, and value systems embedded in collective experience. As phraseological theory widely recognizes, idioms carry “image components”, culturally shared conceptualizations mediating between the literal scene and the figurative interpretation (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2022). These image traces often reflect culturally salient understandings of the natural world, which become entrenched in the lexical system through conventional figurative language. Within this broad field, the present study focuses specifically on gender distinction as encoded in Albanian animal idioms. Many species that appear in the idiomatic repertoire, such as horse, sheep, goat, or chicken, have clearly differentiated male and female forms in both naming and cultural perception. This lexicalized natural gender becomes a powerful source domain for metaphorical mappings that convey evaluations of human traits. The central premise of this research is that the figurative contrast between male and female animals does not simply reflect biological difference; rather, it constructs culturally meaningful semantic oppositions that may illuminate broader conceptualizations of strength, vulnerability, authority, domesticity, productivity, and social exposure.

The idioms analyzed, approximately 150 in total, are drawn from *Fjalori frazeologjik i gjuhës shqipe* (1999) (“Phraseological Dictionary of the Albanian Language”) and *Fjalori i gjuhës së sotme shqipe* (1980) (“Dictionary of Contemporary Albanian”). Methodologically, the study combines qualitative semantic analysis with insights from cognitive linguistics and cultural linguistics. Following the approach outlined by Nunberg, Sag, and Wasow (1994), idioms are treated as conventional units whose meaning emerges from culturally embedded patterns rather than from the literal meanings of their constituents alone. At the same time, the analysis adopts Sharifian's (2011) concept of “cultural conceptualizations,” which views language as a site where collective models of behavior, gender, morality, and social organization become entrenched in lexical structures.

To capture the role of gender, idioms are examined in paired lexical sets. For each pair, the analysis explores three main aspects:

- Which physical or behavioral traits of the animal motivate the idiom's figurative meaning?
- How is natural gender mapped onto human traits, roles, or value judgments?
- What similarities and divergences emerge across male-female pairs in terms of semantic load and axiological orientation?
- The study is guided by the following research questions:
- How do the observable behavioral and physical characteristics of animals provide

motivation for Albanian idioms?

- In what ways does natural gender structure the semantic differentiation between idioms derived from male and female animals?
- Which cultural models, related to agency, hierarchy, productivity, vulnerability, or morality, underpin these gendered figurative mappings?
- To what extent do paired idioms reveal systematic metaphorical dichotomies that reflect broader cultural understandings of masculinity and femininity?

These questions enable a focused exploration of gender not simply as a grammatical category, but as a culturally significant dimension of Albanian phraseology. Natural gender functions as a conceptual anchor through which social evaluations are articulated, even though these interpretations require careful empirical analysis rather than presupposition.

The analytical framework therefore assumes that idioms are culturally distributed cognitive tools (Sharifian, 2011), whose semantic motivation depends on shared knowledge about the animal world and social experience. By examining idioms through the lens of gender differentiation, the study aims to illuminate how Albanian speakers conceptualize social roles and behavioral expectations through the natural world. While the analysis does not seek to impose predefined interpretations, it investigates how idiomatic contrasts encode meaningful cultural distinctions that merit systematic linguistic exploration.

2. Results of the analysis: Gendered patterns in Albanian animal idioms

The analysis of the collected 150 idiomatic expressions reveals a highly systematic structure in which natural gender functions as a central organizing principle. Although the idioms originate in shared pastoral experience, their figurative development diverges markedly depending on whether the lexical base refers to a male or a female animal. To illustrate these patterns, the results are presented through paired lexical sets: *pulë* (hen) - *gjel* (rooster), *dele* (ewe) - *dash* (ram), *dhi* (goat) - *cjap* (billy goat), *lopë* (cow) - *viç* (calf)/*ka* (bull)/*qe* (oxen), *kalë* (horse) - *pelë* (mare), *mace* (cat) - *maçok* (tomcat), allowing for a comparative examination of how physical traits, behavioral tendencies, and culturally coded gender roles shape figurative meaning. Each pair is analyzed to identify common semantic frames, gendered divergences, and the evaluative orientations embedded in the idioms. This structure makes it possible to trace both the shared motivational imagery and the systematic asymmetries that reflect broader cultural conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity in Albanian phraseology.

2.1 *Pulë* (hen) - *Gjel* (rooster)

Albanian phraseology draws heavily from the agricultural and domestic environment, where animals function as culturally familiar reference points for human behavior, emotion, and social identity. Among the most symbolically charged figures are the hen and the rooster, two creatures that share the same biological species yet diverge

widely in their metaphorical uses due to their natural gender roles. The idioms built with these terms form a revealing linguistic corpus through which Albanian culture encodes gendered expectations, social hierarchies, and behavioral norms. As Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen (2022) observe, figurative expressions preserve culturally embedded "image components" that mediate between literal perception and symbolic meaning, a point that aligns with their broader argument that idioms derive meaning from culturally transmitted codes. Likewise, animal metaphors typically rely on socially shared conceptual associations, which render their figurative meanings culturally predictable (Nesi, 1995). This analysis examines the similarities and differences between idioms containing *pulë* (hen) and those containing *gjel* (rooster), highlighting how natural gender influences figurative meaning when describing human actions and states.

A central commonality between the two sets of idioms is their grounding in everyday rural experience. Because hens and roosters have long been part of the Albanian domestic sphere, their behavior is familiar and easily mapped onto human conditions. Cross-linguistically, animal metaphors often emerge from traditional rural life, where observational knowledge of domestic animals becomes culturally codified (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2022), reflecting what phraseological theory identifies as experiential and environment-based motivation. Both idiom groups contain expressions referring to confusion and disorientation, such as *si pulë pa kokë* ("like a headless hen") and *gjel pa kokë (i therur)* ("a headless rooster, slaughtered"). Their figurative logic reflects what research describes as "rich image" motivation, where literal behavioral scenarios motivate abstract meanings (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2022). Idioms such as *ra si pula në grurë* ("he fell like hens into wheat") and *ra si gjeli në thekër* ("he fell like the rooster into rye") likewise draw upon universally recognizable behavioral frames, animals encountering abundance, making the metaphors intuitive within their cultural setting (Nesi, 1995). These shared patterns show that, before gendered meanings diverge, the expressions rely on observation of animals in their domestic environment.

Despite these overlaps, the figurative development of the hen and the rooster idioms diverges sharply because of the symbolic force of natural gender. Animal terms rarely function neutrally; communities typically assign them gendered or moral qualities that become conventionalized through repeated use (Ruhanen, 2015). The hen appears dominantly as a metaphor for vulnerability, modesty, emotional sensitivity, and domesticity. Idioms such as *u bë pulë* ("he/she became a hen," meaning to submit) and *rrin si pulë e lagur* ("sits like a wet hen," meaning fearful or ashamed) highlight the hen as lacking strength or confidence. Similar interpretations appear cross-culturally (Galera Masegosa, 2010). Expressions like *nuk e nxjerr dot pulën nga kopshti* ("he cannot even drive the hen out of the garden") and *shumë pula e pak vezë* ("many hens but few eggs") reinforce evaluations of ineffectiveness. As emphasized by Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen (2022), such figurative uses are motivated by culturally shared evaluations of the animal's behavior. Dundes (1980) further shows that the hen is a stable cultural symbol of domesticity and feminine passivity in European folklore, supporting the

feminine associations embedded in hen idioms.

Even idioms highlighting cleverness or caution situate the hen within vulnerability. In *s'ha pulë të ngordhur* ("he does not eat a dead hen," meaning he is not naïve) and *s'ia ha dhelpra pulat* ("the fox does not eat his hens," meaning he is shrewd"), the hen is framed within predator-prey relations, a pattern widely documented in animal idioms (Ruhanen, 2015). Such idioms align with frame-based motivation rooted in culturally preserved knowledge of animal interactions. Domesticity also grounds idioms like *bie me pulat* ("goes to sleep with the hens") and *është shkruar në këmbët e pulës* ("written in the hen's footsteps"). Sharifian (2011) argues that such expressions reflect collective cultural conceptualizations. Across the corpus, hen idioms portray qualities traditionally associated with femininity, gentleness, timidity, dependency, domestic rhythm, emotional expressiveness.

The rooster, by contrast, is consistently associated with masculine-coded attributes such as authority, pride, courage, aggression, and social centrality. Numerous studies confirm that animal metaphors encode models of masculinity and femininity (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2022); gender-marked idioms (*geschlechtsspezifische Idioms*) are well documented in phraseological literature. Idioms such as *i del gjel kaproll një pune* ("he confronts a task bravely") reflect the rooster's salient image as fearless and assertive. Similarly, *i këndon gjeli mbi samar* ("the rooster crows over his saddle") associates the rooster with auspiciousness. The idiom *kapardiset si gjeli majë plehut* ("he struts like the rooster on the dung heap") is a typical example of image-based motivation (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2022). Emotional impulsiveness emerges in *hidhet si gjel* ("jumps like a rooster"). These idioms highlight the rooster as a symbol of energy and dominance, consistent with European symbolic codes for animal behavior.

Yet rooster metaphors can also critique masculinity. The idiom *rrin si gjeli mbi vezë* ("sits like a rooster on eggs") uses a gender-incongruent behavior to index incompetence. Fertility symbolism appears in *kur të pjellë gjeli* ("when the rooster lays an egg," meaning never) and *i pjell edhe gjeli* ("even the rooster lays eggs for him," meaning extraordinary luck). These idioms exemplify index-based motivation (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2022). Meanwhile, *me një gjel plaçka* ("with only one rooster for possessions") signifies extreme poverty and draws on culturally grounded real-world knowledge. Taken together, the idioms show that natural gender functions as a structuring principle in Albanian metaphor. Idioms with hen encode traits associated with femininity, while idioms with rooster encode traits aligned with masculinity. This reflects what Sharifian (2011) calls cultural conceptualizations, and idioms act as linguistic mechanisms for regulating gender norms. In conclusion, Albanian hen-rooster idioms demonstrate the deep entanglement between figurative meaning and cultural cognition (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2022).

2.2 *Dele (ewe) - Dash (ram)*

The pair of terms *dele* ("ewe, female sheep") and *dash* ("ram, male sheep") forms another revealing cluster of Albanian phraseology in which natural gender plays

a structuring role in the formation of figurative meaning. Although both belong to the same pastoral environment and participate in the same socio-economic sphere of Albanian rural life, their idiomatic uses diverge in ways that reflect cultural interpretations of femininity and masculinity. Animal-based idioms preserve culturally shared “image components” that shape how literal animal behavior becomes a source domain for evaluating human traits (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2022), a mechanism tied to symbolic traditions within cultural codes. Likewise, animal metaphors emerge from deeply rooted cultural knowledge, where communities attribute stable evaluative meanings to animals (Nesi, 1995; Ruhanen, 2015). Within this frame, the ewe symbolizes softness, vulnerability, and dependence, whereas the ram symbolizes strength, authority, and public prominence.

Idioms containing the ewe foreground softness, submissiveness, and lack of agency. The expression *u bë dele* (“became a sheep,” meaning submissive or white-haired) merges physical aging with emotional tameness. Research on simile-based idioms shows that physical appearance and behavior often motivate figurative interpretations (Galera Masegosa, 2010), echoing findings that idioms rely on experiential models derived from natural environments. More intensely negative is *është si delja në hell* (“like the sheep on the spit”), describing hopeless suffering. The idiom *shkon si delja qorre pas këmborëve* (“goes like a blind sheep after the bells”) highlights uncritical obedience, consistent with cross-linguistic tendencies where herd animals symbolize conformity (Ruhanen, 2015). *Dele e zezë* (“black sheep”) mirrors an international metaphor for deviance. Meanwhile, *ndaj delet nga dhitë* (“separate the sheep from the goats”) extends pastoral practice into moral categorization. Sharifian (2011) notes that such expressions reflect collective cultural conceptualizations, consistent with the culture-based strands of knowledge underlying idiom motivation.

Idioms built with the ram differ by assigning masculine-coded attributes derived from strength, maturity, prestige, and authority. The expression *u bë shelegu dash* (“the lamb became a ram”) conceptualizes growth through biological development. Male animals often embody culturally valued traits such as strength and dominance (Ruhanen, 2015). Social esteem appears in *dash me flokë* (“ram with wool”), referring to a respected man. Leadership is central to *dash me këmborë* (“ram with a bell”), designating the leading man. In pastoral reality, the ram with a bell guides the flock; metaphorically, this maps onto visibility and authority. Such figurative extensions illustrate how culturally embedded animal images structure human cognition (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2022), in line with symbolic motivation in phrasemes. Likewise, *si dashi me këmborë* (“like the ram with a bell”) conveys proud forwardness. The ram also appears as a figure of sacrificial burden in *dashi i kurbanit* (“ram of the sacrifice”), referring to someone suffering for others’ faults. This relies on ritualized cultural knowledge, one of the motivational structures of figurative units (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2022), reflecting the historical-cultural grounding of idioms. Conversely, *janë si dashi me rruçezën* (“like the ram with the ewe”) symbolizes harmony. Here pastoral life provides positive relational templates, illustrating what Sharifian (2011) calls emergent cultural cognition. Taken together, the ewe idioms

emphasize vulnerability and dependence, traits linked to femininity, whereas the ram idioms emphasize authority, maturity, and leadership, traits aligned with masculinity. Through these patterns, Albanian phraseology encodes pastoral gender symbolism into cultural metaphors for behavior. As emphasized across figurative-language scholarship, such expressions preserve not only lexicalized meaning but also the cultural knowledge from which they emerged (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2022), confirming idioms as culturally grounded symbolic systems.

2.3 *Dhi* (goat) - *cjap* (billy goat)

The pair *dhi* ("goat," typically female) and *cjap* ("billy goat" male goat) provides a rich field for examining how Albanian phraseology encodes behavioral and gendered distinctions drawn from pastoral life. Although goats and billy goats share the same ecological and domestic environment, their symbolic functions diverge strongly due to observed behavioral differences. As studies on figurative animal meanings show, communities often attribute stable character traits to familiar animals, transforming behavioral observations into culturally conventionalized symbolism (Nesi, 1995; Ruhanen, 2015), a process aligned with what phraseological theory identifies as symbolic motivation within cultural codes. Within this cultural logic, the goat is associated with nervousness, impulsiveness, and misjudgment, whereas the billy goat embodies stubbornness, recklessness, intoxication, and incompetence. These figurative meanings reflect both natural characteristics of the animals and culturally embedded expectations surrounding femininity and masculinity. In line with what Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen (2022) describe as "image-based motivation," idioms in this semantic field rely on shared mental images that anchor metaphorical interpretation.

Idioms with the goat frequently foreground impulsiveness, unruliness, and a lack of proper judgment. The widely used phrase *ku di dhia ç'është tagjia* ("how would a goat know the value of good fodder," meaning someone cannot appreciate what is genuinely valuable) frames the goat as incapable of discernment. Research on simile-based idioms emphasizes that figurative meaning often arises from evaluations of animals as greedy, restless, or indifferent to quality, traits easily mapped onto human behavior (Galera Masegosa, 2010), reflecting the broader principle that idioms often derive motivation from experiential knowledge of the natural environment. Such symbolism becomes gendered in idioms referring specifically to girls or women, such as *dhi arrakate* ("wandering goat," describing a restless girl who does not stay home) and *dhi e egër* ("wild goat," referring to a lively but unapproachable girl or woman). These expressions align the female goat with stereotypes of impulsive, socially unrestrained femininity, illustrating how figurative language can encode cultural expectations of proper versus improper female behavior (Sharifian, 2011), consistent with the observation that gender-specific idioms (*geschlechtsspezifische Idiome*) reflect social norms.

The idiom *njihet si dhia në mes të dhenve* ("known like the goat among sheep," describing someone who stands out negatively or does not belong) emphasizes incompatibility

and deviation from social homogeneity. According to cross-linguistic studies, animals that differ visibly from the flock often become metaphors for social deviation or outsider status (Ruhanen, 2015). A related expression, *mbeti si dhia në gjollë* ("remained like the goat in fresh leaves," meaning someone clings excessively to something they enjoy), highlights fixation and stubborn enjoyment, both humorous and excessive. In *e pret si dhia thikën* ("awaits like the goat the knife"), the goat becomes an emblem of intense fear and dread, demonstrating what Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen describe as culturally persistent emotional imagery embedded in figurative expressions. Other idioms further develop the symbolic association of the goat with unpredictability and foolishness. *Dhi e zgjebosur e bishtin përpetjetë* ("a mangy goat with its tail raised," describing a worthless yet arrogant person) critiques pretension without merit. *I mungojnë dhitë* ("he is missing goats," meaning he is mentally unsettled) uses the image of uncontrollable goats to signify confusion, a pattern consistent with cognitive models where animal unruliness becomes a metaphor for psychological instability (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2022). The expressions *u bënë si këmbët e dhisë* ("became like the goat's legs," meaning hierarchy or order became unclear) and *s'jemi si këmbët e dhisë* ("we are not equal in age or importance") rely on bodily asymmetry as a figurative source, illustrating how concrete perceptual features of animals help conceptualize social distinctions (Galera Masegosa, 2010).

Idioms with billy goat carry distinct masculine connotations, emphasizing stubbornness, recklessness, intoxication, and incompetence. *I ka hipur cjamin* ("he has mounted the he-goat," meaning he is very drunk) derives from the billy goat's jerky, unstable movements; this mapping of animal motion onto drunkenness exemplifies the metaphorical exploitation of behavioral frames noted in cognitive idiom research (Nesi, 1995). Similarly, *shkoi si cjamin te kasapi* ("went like the he-goat to the butcher," meaning he walked into danger unknowingly) presents the billy goat as naïve or self-destructive, illustrating how masculinity can be conceptualized through impulsive risk-taking. In idioms describing incompetence or lack of suitability, the billy goat becomes an evaluative measure. *S'është as për cjamin as për këmborë* ("fit neither for billy goat nor for bell," meaning useless or incapable) and *s'është cjamin për atë zile* ("not a billy goat for that bell," meaning unfit for the given responsibility) draw from pastoral hierarchy: the leading goat wears the bell. This mirrors what Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen identify as index-based motivation, where elements of traditional material culture establish mappings between social competence and animal roles. In contrast, *dhia mish e cjamin tavë* ("the goat for meat and the he-goat for stew," meaning it makes no difference) neutralizes gender distinctions in certain contexts, illustrating how figurative contrasts may collapse within pragmatic rural reasoning.

Overall, goat idioms emphasize misjudgment, social deviation, nervousness, and improper behaviour, often employed as critiques of female conduct. While billy goat idioms express masculine-coded recklessness, intoxication, and unfitness for leadership. Together, these expressions demonstrate how Albanian pastoral culture transforms animal behavior into symbolic frameworks for evaluating human identity, morality, and gendered expectations. As figurative-language scholarship argues,

such idioms preserve not only figurative meaning but also cultural knowledge and social norms embedded within the pastoral world from which they arise (Sharifian, 2011; Dobrovol'skiy & Piirainen, 2022), consistent with the view that idioms operate as culturally grounded symbolic systems.

2.4 *Lopë (cow) - viç (calf)/ ka (bull/ox)/ qe (oxen)*

The semantic pair *lopë* ("cow," female) and *viç* ("calf"), together with the broader bovine set *ka* ("bull/ox," usually male) and *qetë* ("oxen"), forms one of the richest and most culturally saturated phraseological fields in Albanian. As studies of animal metaphors show, domestic animals that carry high economic and symbolic value often develop extensive figurative networks within a language (Nesi, 1995; Ruhanen, 2015). In Albanian traditional society, cows and oxen are essential productive assets, whereas the bull symbolizes strength, virility, and assertiveness. These symbolic roles, rooted in biological function, labor utility, and pastoral experience, are transferred directly into idioms describing human behavior. As Dobrovol'skiy and Piirainen (2022) argue, such figurative mappings rely on culturally shared "image components" that sustain conventional meaning across generations, consistent with their analysis of symbolic and experience-based motivation in agricultural phraseology. The Albanian idioms built on cow - calf/bull/oxen illustrate how natural gender, age, economic logic, and rural hierarchies structure metaphorical meaning in social discourse.

Idioms with the cow typically encode evaluations of physical appearance, naivety, or lack of awareness. *U bë lopë* ("she became a cow," meaning 'she fattened noticeably' or 'she fails to perceive mockery') draws from the animal's large body and slow demeanor to symbolize heaviness, dullness, and diminished discernment. This reflects a pattern noted in cognitive idiom studies: physical features of large domesticated animals motivate figurative readings related to slowness or lack of refinement (Galera Masegosa, 2010), aligning with the principle that animal imagery often derives from perceptual salience. Hyperbolic impossibility appears in *kur të flasin lopët* ("when cows speak"), mirroring a cross-cultural tendency to use animal silence as a marker of impossibility. Economic knowledge surfaces in *(ka) sa të hanë lopët* ("as much as cows eat"), exploiting the cow's reputation for large consumption. The idiom *i ikën lopa me gjithë viç* ("the cow runs away with its calf," meaning 'major mistakes go unnoticed') conveys negligence and poor oversight. Stronger symbolic layering appears in expressions based on licking: *e ka lëpirë lopa* ("the cow has licked him/her," meaning either 'he/she is neat, well-kept' or 'shameless'). This duality, one aesthetic, one moral, derives from natural grooming behavior, what Dobrovol'skiy and Piirainen (2022) conceptualize as an etymological image preserved in figurative interpretation. A sharper negative form, *i ka lëpirë lopa trutë* ("the cow has licked his/her brain," meaning 'he/she has lost reason'), uses the same physical image to metaphorize the erasure of judgment. Carelessness and unfiltered speech appear in *e lëshon si lopa bajgën* ("he releases it as the cow drops dung"), aligning impulsive language with instinctive animal behavior.

Moral economy emerges in *ta merr lopën me gjithë viç* ("he takes the cow with the calf,"

meaning 'he takes advantage; gives little but takes much'), relying on the pastoral logic of asymmetrical exchange. Conversely, good fortune is encoded in *i ka pjellë lopa* ("the cow has given birth for him," meaning 'things are going well'), where the birth of a calf symbolizes prosperity. This semantic link between reproduction and luck is observed cross-linguistically in figurative livestock metaphors (Ruhanen, 2015). Such mappings follow what figurative-language research describes as symbolic motivation rooted in cultural tradition.

Idioms built on calf reflect immaturity, naivety, or exaggerated behavior. Exceptional good fortune appears in *i pjell edhe vîçi* ("even the calf gives birth for him"), exploiting biological impossibility to indicate luck, a frequent motivational structure in figurative expressions (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2022), and consistent with symbolic impossibility metaphors. *Kur të qethen vîçat* ("when the calves are shorn") is another impossibility idiom grounded in pastoral knowledge. Immaturity surfaces in *vîçi i palëpirë* ("unlicked calf," meaning 'an inexperienced person') and *vîçi i vonë* ("late calf," meaning 'a young man unprepared for life'), relying on observable dependence and developmental delay to metaphorize human unreadiness.

The symbolic charge intensifies with bull. The bull embodies force, stubbornness, and risk. *Si kau në ugar* ("like the bull in the ploughed field," meaning 'moving aimlessly or wasting effort') encodes futile exertion. Exaggeration is criticized in *e bën mizën ka* ("he makes a fly into a bull"), a classic scaling metaphor also attested in other languages. Emotional indifference appears in *e do si kau kashtën* ("he loves it like the bull loves straw," meaning 'not at all'), linking selective appetite to emotional detachment. Economic devotion emerges in *e ruan si i varfëri kaun* ("he guards it like the poor man guards his bull"), reflecting the bull's historic value as a labor and status resource.

Loss and misdirected priorities are encapsulated in *humbi qetë e pyet për brirët* ("he lost the oxen and asks about the horns," meaning 'he loses what is essential but worries about trivialities'). As noted in figurative-language theory, idioms of this type encode culturally shared scripts of rational versus irrational concern (Sharifian, 2011). Acceptance and finality appear in *qe si qe e u bë si ka* ("whatever happened, happened"), using bovine metaphors to signal closure. Spatial disorientation appears in *sillet si kau në arë* ("moves like the bull in the field"), critiquing aimlessness. Distinctiveness arises in *njihet si kau balash* ("known like the spotted bull"), where visibility and uniqueness become markers of recognizability. Fear and reduced courage surface in *është ka me një bri* ("a one-horned bull," meaning 'someone diminished in strength'). Unattainability appears in *kërkon kaun në gji* ("he looks for the bull in the bosom"), a critique of unreasonable expectations.

Social expendability is expressed in *nuk na la qetë në arë* ("did not let the oxen in the field," meaning 'someone is not essential'). Procrastination and futility are encoded in *e majm kaun ditë që do ta therë* ("he fattens the bull on the day he plans to slaughter it"), illustrating counterproductive timing. Conflict emerges in *i mbrehu qetë* ("he yoked the oxen," meaning 'he initiated a confrontation'). Exceptional luck appears in *i pjell edhe kau* ("even the bull gives birth for him"), extending the pattern of biological

impossibility as a marker of extraordinary fortune. Lastly, misassigned responsibility appears in *në vend që të qajnë qetë qan qerrja* ("instead of crying for the oxen, cries for the cart"), criticizing misplaced complaint, an example of the complex cultural imagery embedded in figurative units, as noted in phraseological research.

Taken together, these idioms reveal a highly structured symbolic system in which female bovines (*lopë*) represent naivety, bodily evaluation, shamelessness, and fortune; calves (*viç*) symbolize immaturity and exaggeration; and bulls/oxen (*ka, qetë*) embody power, risk, misjudgment, and labor. Across these categories, Albanian phraseology maps pastoral knowledge and gendered expectations onto human behavior, creating a dense figurative landscape where animals serve as cultural mirrors for identity, morality, and cognitive evaluation. As highlighted in figurative-language scholarship, such idioms preserve not only metaphorical meaning but also the cultural scripts and social hierarchies of the pastoral world (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2022).

2.5 *Kalë* (horse) – *pelë* (mare)

The pair *kalë* ("horse," typically male) and *pelë* ("mare," female) forms one of the most symbolically potent pair in Albanian phraseology. Horses hold a central place in Albanian cultural history, functioning as markers of mobility, prestige, labor, and risk. As studies of figurative animal expressions note, animals that play major economic and social roles in traditional life often develop extensive idiomatic systems (Nesi, 1995), consistent with the principle that culturally salient animals generate dense metaphorical networks. Within this framework, the male horse is associated with strength, authority, and unrestrained movement, whereas the mare embodies valuation, economic cost, reproductive responsibility, and social vulnerability. These gendered symbolic roles align with what Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen (2022) describe as "image-based motivation," through which culturally entrenched images of animals shape figurative meaning. When mapped onto human behavior, idioms based on the horse and the mare construct a complex metaphorical landscape encoding power relations, personality traits, and social hierarchies.

Idioms built around the horse emphasize control, movement, decision-making, and the consequences of misjudgment. *Ta bësh dhëmbin sa të kalit* ("make your tooth as big as the horse's," meaning 'no matter how hard you try, you will not gain anything') highlights futile effort in structurally unwinnable situations. Falling from status appears in *ra nga kali* ("fell from the horse," meaning 'lost a high position' or 'failed to complete a task'), where the horse symbolizes elevated social standing and dismounting signals decline. Experience and resilience emerge in *ka rënë shumë herë nga kali* ("he has fallen from the horse many times"), reflecting what cognitive-cultural linguistics identifies as the embodiment of personal history through experiential metaphors (Sharifian, 2011), aligned with the cultural embedding of "image components" in phraseology.

Full control and prosperity are conveyed in *është hipur në kalë* ("he is mounted on the horse," meaning 'his affairs are in order'). By contrast, disengagement appears

in *s'i kam hipur atij kalit* ("I have not mounted that horse," meaning 'I have not begun that task'). Reckless action is encoded in *i ka hipur kalit qorr* ("he has mounted a blind horse"), where lack of foresight and danger become central themes. These idioms exemplify what Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen identify as culturally persistent conceptual structures rooted in pastoral experience, and correspond to pattern-based motivation in agricultural settings.

Moreover, idioms reflect the horse's symbolic association with autonomy and danger. *Kalë azat* ("free horse," meaning 'a person who behaves without rules') and *kalë pa fre* ("horse without a bit," meaning 'a person out of control') depict unregulated behavior linked to masculine-coded independence. Similar dynamics appear in *kalë i azdisur* ("a spoiled horse"), metaphorizing the arrogance of youth or resistance to authority. As Galera Masegosa (2010) notes, idioms of this type often rely on physical or behavioral characteristics of animals to express social evaluations, consistent with cross-linguistic phraseological tendencies.

The idiomatic field expands through representations of pressure and burden. *Kali i belarave* ("the horse of troubles," meaning 'the person who ends up carrying everyone's problems') associates the horse with overwork and exploitation. *Kalë karroce* ("carriage horse," meaning 'a narrow-minded or one-task individual') suggests limited cognitive range, evoking the constricted vision of a draft animal. Weakness appears in *kalë i ngordhur* ("dead horse"), describing a powerless or ineffective person. Futile effort resurfaces in *sillet si kali në lëmë* ("moves like the horse in the threshing floor"), symbolizing circular movement without progress.

Harshness and opportunism emerge in *u rrëzua kali e i pret këmbët* ("the horse fell and he cuts its legs"), where cruelty and opportunistic behavior are condemned. Social demotion is expressed in *zbriti nga kali e hipi në gomar* ("he dismounted the horse and mounted the donkey"), underscoring loss of prestige, an evaluative structure widely seen in hierarchical animal metaphors across cultures (Ruhanen, 2015) and in the symbolic ordering of animal roles.

Idioms involving the mare emphasize economic value, social exposure, and disproportionate cost. *Një thelë sa për një pelë* ("a morsel fit for a mare," meaning 'very expensive') draws on the mare's high maintenance and reproductive value. Spatial proximity is metaphorized in *një vrap pele* ("a mare's gallop away," meaning 'very near'). Social embarrassment is encoded in *del si mëzi para pelës* ("comes out like the foal before the mare"), which criticizes premature or incompetent public behavior. These patterns reflect what Sharifian (2011) describes as cultural conceptualizations linking animals to social norms and expectations, functioning within culturally transmitted schemas.

Dishonesty and exposure appear in *e zunë me pelë për dore* ("they caught him holding a mare by the hand"), describing someone caught stealing. Poor judgment and economic imbalance surface in *çon një pelë e ha një thelë* ("sends a mare and eats one bite"), highlighting disproportionate investment for minimal return, a mapping grounded in pastoral economic logic. This reflects what phraseological theory calls experience-based symbolic motivation in idioms.

Taken together, these idioms show how natural gender structures figurative meaning: the horse idioms convey power, autonomy, control, recklessness, labour, and status, while the mare idioms emphasize cost, value, vulnerability, premature action, and social exposure. The horse represents mobility and authority, qualities aligned with cultural models of masculinity; whereas the mare functions as a symbol of economic burden, reproductive worth, and heightened social risk. Through these phraseological patterns, Albanian linguistic culture transforms equine behavior into metaphorical frameworks for evaluating human competence, leadership, morality, and social standing. As Dobrovol'skiĳ and Piirainen (2022) note, idioms of this kind preserve not only linguistic imagery but also the cultural worldviews and social hierarchies embedded in pastoral life.

2.6 *Mace (cat) – maçok (tomcat)*

The symbolic pairing of *mace* ("cat," typically female) and *maçok* ("tomcat," male) forms an expressive and psychologically rich subsystem within Albanian phraseology. Cats hold a unique position in Albanian cultural imagination: domestic yet unpredictable, familiar yet elusive, animals whose behavior easily lends itself to evaluations of cunning, appetite, emotional fluctuation, and stealth. As studies on figurative animal expressions observe, animals that provoke strong cultural reactions often generate dense idiomatic networks (Ruhanen, 2015), consistent with the principle that cultural salience shapes idiom productivity. When differentiated by gender, however, their symbolic roles diverge: the cat encodes timidity, slyness, misfortune, or suppressed desire, whereas the tomcat represents arrogance, envy, stubbornness, or disruptive behavior. These idioms reveal how Albanian cultural cognition maps feline behavior onto nuanced interpretations of human psychology and social dynamics, reflecting the broader principle that figurative meaning arises from culturally shared conceptualizations grounded in observable animal behavior (Dobrovol'skiĳ & Piirainen, 2022).

Idioms involving the cat highlight emotional sensitivity, subdued presence, hidden appetite, and social discomfort. The expression *s'e ha as macja* ("not even the cat eats it," meaning 'it is unpleasant or of very poor quality') relies on the stereotypical pickiness of cats to evaluate both literal food and metaphorical circumstances. As noted in studies on metaphorical and metonymic processes in idioms, such mappings draw on familiar behavioral frames that make figurative meaning cognitively accessible (Galera Masegosa, 2010), echoing the broader mechanism of image-based motivation. A related idiom, *s'i ha macja cironkat* ("the cat does not eat the gudgeons," meaning 'someone desires something but pretends not to'), uses feline selectiveness to symbolize hidden longing or coyness, linking the cat to emotional concealment and modesty as performance.

A stronger behavioral reading appears in *rri sikur i ka ngrënë macja brumin* ("sits as if the cat has eaten his dough," meaning 'sits quietly and avoids making noise'). Here the cat's stealth becomes a metaphor for subdued or inhibited presence. Emotional shame and guilt enter through *rri si mace e lagur* ("sits like a wet cat," meaning 'sits

ashamed or humiliated'), where the image of a drenched, diminished cat embodies vulnerability and loss of confidence. Fear and anticipatory anxiety surface in *rri si macja në sofër* ("sits like the cat on the table," meaning 'sits crouched and frightened'), drawing from the cat's tension when caught somewhere forbidden.

The symbolic field broadens in *mace e zezë* ("black cat," meaning 'a bringer of bad luck'), a superstition widely attested across cultures and one of the clearest examples of what Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen describe as cultural-symbolic motivation in figurative units. The idiom *s'e ka mbytur macen* ("he has not drowned the cat," meaning 'he has not shown strictness or authority from the beginning') critiques a failure to establish boundaries, illustrating how idioms encode culturally shared expectations regarding proper social behavior (Sharifian, 2011), in line with collective conceptualizations. Minimization of exaggerated reactions appears in *polli macja* ("the cat has given birth," meaning 'a small event is being overstated'). Hostility and interpersonal tension are expressed in *shkojnë si macja me miun* ("they go like the cat with the mouse," meaning 'they constantly fight'), using predator-prey dynamics as a metaphor for relational conflict.

Taken together, these idioms position the cat as a figure associated with subtlety, emotional interiority, concealed desire, misfortune, and anxious behavior, traits that align with broader cognitive tendencies to map inward, ambivalent emotional states onto smaller or more ambiguous animals (Nesi, 1995), and consistent with symbolic patterns documented in cultural phraseology.

Idioms involving the tomcat shift toward more assertive, intrusive, or socially disruptive behaviors. The expression *i ka hyrë maçoku në bark* ("the tomcat has entered his stomach," meaning either 'he feels envy' or 'he is consumed by greed') draws on the tomcat's restless and territorial nature. This figurative pattern matches what cognitive linguistics describes as the activation of culturally shared emotional schemas through animal behavior (Sharifian, 2011). The tomcat thus symbolizes internal agitation, jealousy, and insatiable appetite.

The idiom *maçok me brirë* ("a horned tomcat," meaning 'a very disobedient or extremely ugly person') intensifies negative characterization through an impossible physical attribute, horns, illustrating what Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen classify as figurative motivation rooted in surreal or exaggerated imagery to heighten expressive force. Masculine vanity and self-importance come to the forefront in *kapardiset si maçoku në thekër* ("struts like the tomcat in the rye," meaning 'shows off pointlessly'). Here, the tomcat's characteristic swagger becomes an anthropomorphic metaphor of boastfulness without achievement, mirroring cross-linguistic tendencies for male animals to symbolize arrogance or dominance (Ruhanen, 2015).

Thus, the tomcat idioms foreground envy, arrogance, stubbornness, appetite, and aggressive posturing, behaviors culturally aligned with outward masculine expressiveness and territoriality. In cognitive-cultural terms, these idioms represent what Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen describe as stable conceptual mappings shaped by gendered expectations and collective knowledge about animal behavior.

Taken together, these idioms reveal a clear gendered division in Albanian feline

phraseology: the female cat (*mace*) evokes shyness, hidden desire, shame, fear, misfortune, or subtle cunning, whereas the male cat (*maçok*) evokes envy, arrogance, stubbornness, greed, and boastful behavior. Natural gender thus plays a central role in structuring figurative meaning, with inward emotionality mapped onto the cat and outward aggression onto the tomcat. Through these symbolic patterns, Albanian phraseology transforms everyday observations of feline behavior into enduring metaphors for human psychology, interpersonal relations, and gendered social expectations.

3. Conclusion

The analysis of approximately 150 Albanian idioms involving animal names demonstrates that animal-based phraseology constitutes a significant cultural and cognitive resource through which Albanian speakers conceptualize human behavior, social roles, and moral evaluation. Central to this study has been the examination of gender-based distinctions, particularly the ways in which the natural gender of animals is mapped onto figurative characterizations of men and women. The findings suggest that the idiomatic system is neither random nor purely descriptive; instead, it reflects deeply rooted cultural models that remain stable across different lexical sets and animal categories.

A first major conclusion concerns the role of salient physical and behavioral features as motivating sources for figurative meaning. Idioms built around animals such as horses, goats, roosters, and sheep draw on widely recognizable behavioral traits: the horse's strength and unpredictability, the goat's stubbornness and agility, the rooster's assertiveness and vigilance, the ewe's vulnerability, or the cow's economic burden. These observable traits form the cognitive basis for the idiom's image component, supporting the claim that Albanian phraseology maintains a strong link between literal imagery and figurative meaning. The regularity of these patterns across the corpus further confirms the explanatory value of image-based motivation proposed by theories of conventional figurative language.

The second and central conclusion concerns gender differentiation. Across all analyzed lexical pairs, male animals tend to be associated with traits coded as active, forceful, or socially dominant. Idioms containing the horse, the billy goat, the rooster, the ram or other male animal terms often foreground agency, initiative, resistance, or even excess. These idioms portray masculinity through metaphors of leadership, impulsiveness, or physical power. Conversely, idioms containing the mare, the goat, the hen, or the ewe frequently encode vulnerability, domesticity, valuation, or emotional reactivity. Female animals become metaphorical templates for traits such as instability, exposure, dependence, or economic cost. Although these associations originate in observable aspects of animal behavior and traditional pastoral knowledge, they extend into a broader evaluative system that symbolically structures gendered expectations in human society.

A third conclusion relates to the consistency and systematicity of these figurative

mappings. When idioms are examined in paired sets, such as horse-mare, hen-rooster, billy goat-goat, ram-ewe, a clear semantic asymmetry emerges. Male idioms tend to highlight outward-oriented action, often dramatizing strength or defiance. Female idioms, by contrast, emphasize states of being rather than action, focusing on emotional, economic, or social vulnerability. This asymmetry points to a patterned conceptualization rather than an accidental distribution of meanings. The lexicalized natural gender of the animals thus functions not only as a grammatical category but as a cultural mechanism for encoding social hierarchies and value judgments.

These findings also reveal the interaction between cultural knowledge and linguistic structure. Albanian idioms preserve traces of a rural socio-economic environment where animals play a central role in daily life and where gendered divisions of labor are strongly marked. The idioms analyzed in this study are therefore not merely linguistic fossils; they continue to transmit a culturally embedded worldview in which gender, labor, and behavior are evaluated through the lens of the natural world. The persistence of these expressions in contemporary language suggests that phraseology serves as a repository of cultural memory, maintaining conceptual structures even as social life changes.

Another important conclusion is the presence of axiological orientations embedded in idiomatic contrasts. The male-female dichotomies are not neutral; they often index implicit judgments about value, productivity, or moral character. For instance, idioms involving female animals sometimes highlight economic liability, as in expressions that metaphorically equate a person or a situation with the “cost” of a mare or a cow. Male animal idioms, on the other hand, may express superiority or assertiveness, even when the evaluation is ambivalent. These patterns illustrate how idioms function as evaluative tools, shaping the moral and social interpretation of human behavior.

From a methodological perspective, the study demonstrates the usefulness of combining lexical, semantic, and cultural-linguistic approaches. The pairing of idioms according to natural gender enabled a clearer identification of semantic contrasts that might otherwise remain diffuse. Moreover, examining idioms through the lens of cultural conceptualizations provides insight into how collective knowledge structures are encoded and transmitted through fixed expressions. This interdisciplinary approach underscores the value of phraseology as a site where linguistic form, cultural cognition, and social ideology intersect.

Finally, the study opens several avenues for further research. One promising direction involves comparative analysis with idioms from neighboring Balkan languages to explore potential regional patterns of gendered metaphor. Another direction concerns sociolinguistic variation: how are these idioms perceived, used, or reinterpreted by younger speakers, urban communities, or diaspora groups? Additionally, diachronic research could trace how certain idioms have evolved or faded, shedding light on shifts in cultural conceptualizations of gender and social behavior.

In conclusion, the examination of Albanian animal idioms demonstrates that gendered figurative language constitutes a robust and revealing component of Albanian cultural cognition. The idioms analyzed offer more than metaphorical color; they articulate a

stable system of symbolic oppositions rooted in pastoral life and transmitted through linguistic tradition. By foregrounding natural gender as a structuring principle, this study sheds light on how language captures and perpetuates culturally meaningful distinctions in the understanding of human character, agency, and social value.

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