

Neko ‘Cat’ in Japanese Idioms (Meaning and Figure of Speech Analysis)

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Abstract. Generally, idioms are formed with words related to the sense of taste, human body, color, numbers, growth, natural objects and animals. In this study, a Japanese idiom that is formed from *neko* ‘cat’ is discussed. This study is a qualitative research that aims to find out the lexical and idiomatic meaning of the idiom containing word *neko* and the figure of speech. The data are idioms with the word *neko* in *101 Japanese Idioms* by Michael L. Maynard, and website (<https://dictionary.goo.ne.jp>). The results are that 13 idioms that use *neko*. Some idioms have a difference between lexical and idiomatic meaning. However, there is a link between the lexical and idiomatic meaning with the cultural and historical approach of the lexical used. Data contained in the 8 figure of speech Metaphor, namely *neko mo shakushi mo* (猫も杓子も), *neko ni koban* (猫に小判), *neko no hitai* (猫の額), *neko ni matatabi* (猫にまたたび), *neko in katsuobushi* (猫に鰹節), *neko no kubi ni suzu o tsukeru* (猫の首に鈴を付ける), *neko no ko ippiki inai* (猫の子一匹いない), *neko o koroseba shichidai tataru* (猫を殺せば七代崇る). Then 5 figure of speech are included in metonymy, namely *neko no te mo karitai* (猫の手も借りたい), *neko o kaburu* (猫をかぶる), *karite kita neko* (借りてきた猫), *neko o ou yori sakana o noke yo* (猫を追うより魚をのけよ), and *neko o ou yori sara o hiki* (猫を追うより皿を引け).

Keywords: *Japaese Idiom, Neko, Figure of Speech*

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1 Introduction

In linguistic terms, the form of the use of various languages related to expressions is manifested in various forms, one of which is an idiom. Idioms can be present when humans communicate with one another in daily activities, both oral and written. The problem for ordinary people is difficult to understand the meaning of idioms, because the explicit meaning in idioms is vague. Therefore, it must be connected to the actual meaning recognized and used by the language speakers concerned to communicate. [1, p. 25]

The word idiom comes from the Greek word *idióma*, which means ‘specific property’ or ‘unique feature.’ In Japanese, the idiom is called *kanyouku* (慣用句). From the meaning of the

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letter, 慣 (*kan, narau*), means ‘familiar, accustomed’; 用 (*you, mochiiru*), means ‘utilize, business’; and 句 (*ku*) means ‘phrase, sentence.’ Literally it can be said, *kanyouku* is a sentence or phrase that is used in accustomed, prevalent or common. [2, p. 4] Idioms are a variety of expressions that are widely used by people in everyday life and are ‘most populous’. The point is, the formation of idioms is influenced by local wisdom which is the language characteristic of the community.[3, p. 62] Therefore, in two or more different countries, the word forming idioms can be interpreted differently, as the word ‘cat’ in this study.

The meaning of an idiom is a combination of the meaning of two or more words that have been set. The meaning cannot be digested based on the lexical meaning or the combined grammatical meaning of the background setting.[4, p. 12] Idioms are composed not in literal language, but in a metaphorical way. Metaphor makes the meaning of idioms different. Metaphor that in the old view is only a figurative language to beautify language. But in the current view is seen as an embodiment of the human mindset, which is a conceptualization, experience, both physical and mental, about the similarity between one thing and another. [5, p. 66]

Idioms in Japanese have several limitations, namely the arrangement of words that make up new pairs of words cannot be changed, it is not possible to add words or word inserts, and the meaning that appears only exists because of the combination of these words and the construction of their meanings is not the same as the combined meaning of words said the maker. [6, p. 38]

Japanese idioms are formed from various kinds of words, some are formed from parts of the human body, natural objects, colors, sense of taste, plant and animal. In this study, discussed idiom composed of animals, including cats '*neko*' (猫). This study intends to explore the lexical and idiomatic meanings of Japanese idioms with the word '*neko*' as a reflection of Japanese people's views regarding cats and the type of figure of speech contained therein.

On the other hand, Japanese learners rarely use the idiom. That could be caused by the lack of understanding of Japanese learners on idioms. The most common case in *dokkai* (reading) lessons is when Japanese learners interpret lexical idioms only. Whereas in translating the idiom is not all the words translated through its lexical meaning, because the lexical meaning is the actual meaning or the original meaning of the word. If learners do not understand idioms in their daily use in Japanese society, fluent communication will be difficult to realize. Therefore, this research can help provide an understanding of Japanese idioms and make it easier to understand various discourses in Japanese using idioms with the word *neko*.

2 Methods

This study is a qualitative. Moleong [7, p. 83] stated that qualitative research is research that intends to understand phenomena about what is experienced by the research subject, for

example behavior, perception, motivation, action, etc. Holistically, and by way of description in the form of words and language, in a special natural context and by utilizing various natural methods.

The method used is descriptive method. Gay [8, p. 30] defines descriptive research as an activity which involves collecting data in order to test hypotheses or answer questions concerning circumstances at the time that are running from the subject of a study. Descriptive research determines and reports on the present situation.

The data sources in this study are book 101 Japanese Idioms by Michael L Maynard [9] and the website <https://dictionary.goo.ne.jp/> that provides various data related to idioms with the word *neko*. The data are idioms that use the word *neko*.

In collecting data, the technique used is the note taking technique. The note taking technique according to Sudaryanto [10, p. 135] aims to record data obtained from observations. The data obtained is recorded on a data card or the record can use a computer. Then, in the study of the meaning of idiom, the writer will describe the phrase / clause and be analyzed from the lexical meaning, idiomatical meaning, and how the relationship between the two meanings in the idiom. The relation between lexical meaning (*mojidouri no imi*) and idiomatical meaning (*kanyouteki na imi*) is described. This is intended to explain why the idiomatic meaning emerged, from various perspectives, especially Japanese culture or customs. To clarify the relationship of meaning as used in cognitive linguistics as Sutedi [11, p. 209] used by using the three figure of speech, namely metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche.

Metaphor (*in-yu* / 隱喩) is the style of language used to compare one thing (for example A) with another thing (for example B), because of the similarity. Metonymy (*kan-yu* / 韓愈) is the style of language used to compare one thing (A) with another thing (B), because of the proximity or the existence of a connection both in space and in time. Synecdoche (*teiyu* / 提喩) is the style of language used to equate something general (A) with something more specific (B), or vice versa thing (B) is likened to a general thing (A).

3 Results and Discussion

From the analysis of the data, the results were found that there were 13 idioms formed from the word *neko*. Next is the idiom table with the word *neko*.

Table 1. Idioms with the word *neko*

No	Idiom	Meaning		Figure of Speech
		Lexical	Idiomatical	
1.	猫も杓子も <i>Neko mo shakushi mo</i>	Cat and bamboo spoon	Each person, everyone	metaphor

2.	猫に小判 <i>Neko ni koban</i>	Coins for cats	useless / pointless	metaphor
3.	猫の額 <i>Neko no hitai</i>	Cat's forehead	Very narrow	metaphor
4.	猫の手も借りたい <i>Neko no te mo karitai</i>	Want to borrow a cat's hand	Very busy	metonymy
5.	猫をかぶる <i>Neko o kaburu</i>	Cover the face with a cat	Lies, falsehoods,	metonymy
6.	猫にまたたび <i>Neko ni matatabi</i>	Matatabi for cats	Attention	metaphor
7.	借りてきた猫 <i>Karite kita neko</i>	Borrowing cat	Shy, quiet	metonymy
8.	猫に鰹節 <i>Neko ni katsuobushi</i>	A piece of bonito for cats	Circumstances must not be careless	metaphor
9.	猫の首に鈴を付ける <i>Neko no kubi ni suzu o tsukeru</i>	Put a bell on the cat's neck	A good plan must be executed well	metaphor
10.	猫の子一匹いない <i>Neko no ko ippiki inai</i>	There are no kittens	No one (person)	metaphor
11.	猫を殺せば七代崇る <i>Neko o koroseba shichidai tataru</i>	If it kills a cat, it is condemned 7 generations	bad luck	metaphor
12.	猫を追うより魚をのけよ <i>Neko o ou yori sakana o noke yo</i>	Instead of chasing a cat, it's better to take the fish	Resolve the cause of the problem	metonymy
13.	猫を追うより皿を引け <i>Neko o ou yori sara o hike</i>	Instead of chasing a cat, just pull the dish	Resolve the cause of the problem	metonymy

Karite kita neko (借りてきた猫)

This idiom is formed from the *neko* noun 「猫」 and the verb '*kariru*' (借りる) means 'to borrow.' The verb '*kariru*' belongs to the group of verbs II in Japanese, then after the verb is changed to the form ～て, then the form ～てくる is followed. The ～た form in *karite kita neko* is the past form.

～てくる 「～てくる」 on this idiom means there is a change. Therefore, lexically can be interpreted as "borrowed cat." If the cat is taken to a place that is still unfamiliar to him, there will be a change in attitude from the cat, which is becoming more quiet and shy. This is because cats are not yet familiar with their new environment. Like the nature of the cat, this idiom describes someone who changes his character to be quiet and shy if not at home or in his own

environment. This idiom uses the style of metonymy, which shows the relationship between the condition of a borrowing cat and the shame and quietness of someone.

An example of using this idiom in a conversation:

雅紀くんはお祖母さんの家に行くのが初めてだったので、借りてきた猫のようだった。

Misaki-kun wa obaasan no ie ni ikuno ga hajimetedatta node, karitekita neko no you datta.

Because Masaki was the first time visiting Grandma's house, she seemed like a quiet person.

Neko mo shakushi mo (猫も杓子も)

This idiom is formed from the *neko* noun 「猫」, *shakushi* 「杓子」 and particle *mo* 「も」. The *mo* particle in this idiom serves to explain the same thing, which can be interpreted 'and, also'. *Sakushi* means rice spoon made of bamboo. Lexically, this idiom means 'cat and bamboo spoon.'

An example of using this idiom in a conversation::

A 女： 最近またスカート丈が少し短くなったようね。

Saikin mata sukaatotake ga sukoshikunatta you ne.

It looks like the skirt length has become a little shorter recently.

B 女： そうなのよ。これで猫も杓子もみじかいスカートになるんでしょ。個性がなくていやになるわね。まったく。

Sounano yo. Korede take neko mo shakushi mo mijikai sukaato ni narundesho. Kosei ga nakute iya ni naru wa ne. Mattaku.

You are right. Nowadays **everyone** also wears a short skirt. It's not your style at all, I don't like it. Really.

From the conversation above it can be understood that this idiom is used to express something that is actually not good and appropriate in society but has been done by many people. Therefore, this idiom is more appropriate if interpreted 'everyone'.

Neko ni Koban (猫に小判)

In this idiom, there is the noun *koban* (小判). *Koban* is a small oval shaped gold coin that circulated in Japan before the Meiji restoration in 1868. Then the *ni* 「に」 particle showed the object to (for/to ~). The *ni* 「に」 particle in this idiom is showing the given object. Therefore, this idiom means 'gold coin for cats.'

When a cat is given a gold coin. Then the cat will not be interested in the coin because for cats the coin is not a useful object. Because of that, *neko ni koban* means something that is useless or pointless. This idiom uses a metaphorical style of language that shows the similarity or similarity between the state of ‘a cat that is given a coin’ with ‘useless.’

An example of using this idiom in a conversation:

そんな小さな子にコンピュータ買い与えるなんて、猫に小判だ。

*Sonna chisana ko ni konpyuuta kaiataeru nante, **neko ni koban** da.*

It is **useless** to buy a computer for such a small child.

Neko no hitai (猫の額)

The idiom '*neko no hitai*' is an idiom formed from two nouns, namely *neko* and *hitai* 「額」. *Hitai* means forehead. Then the particle 'no' in this idiom serves to explain that the word in front of the particle, namely *hitai* 「額」 is part of the previous word, which is *neko* 「猫」. Lexically this idiom means cat forehead. '

Cats are animals that do not have wide foreheads. So it idiomatically means narrow or not wide. This idiom uses a metaphorical style of language that shows the similarity or similarity between a cat's forehead with a narrow.

An example of using this idiom in a conversation::

A 女： 新しい庭付きの家に移ったんですって？

Atarashii niwatsuki no ie ni utsuttan desutte ?

I heard you moved to a house with a yard?

B 男： いやね、庭といえるかどうか、ほんの猫の額のような裏庭がついてる程度なんだ。

*Iya ne, niwa to ieruka douka, hon no **neko no hitai** no you na ura niwa ga tsuiteru teido nan da.*

Not really, what can be said by the yard or not, the condition is like a **cat's forehead (not wide)**.

Neko no te mo karitai (猫の手も借りたい)

This idiom is formed from the noun *neko* and *te* 「手」 which means hand. Particles *no* and *mo* as well as the verb '*kariru*' which means to borrow. This verb undergoes a morphological process into a form of hope (*kibou*) by adding *tai* (～たい) at the end of the word to *karitai* 「借りたい」.

Particle *no* 「の」 in this idiom serves as an explanation of ownership or part of something. Therefore, *neko no te* 「猫の手」 means cat's hand. The *mo* 「も」 particle functions to explain doing something that has been done before by someone else. Can be interpreted either 'or also'

Lexically this idiom means 'want to borrow a cat's hand too.' This idiom shows the meaning of 'very busy', because everyday cats are always busy using their feet and hands to indulge. This idiom uses the style of metonymy, which shows the relationship between a cat's hand with the help of another person.

Example:

あの、ちょっとごめんなさい。ここの事務所、今日、引っ越しで、猫の手も借りたような忙しさなの。あとで電話するよ。

Ano, chotto gomennasai. Koko no jimusho, kyou, hikkoshi de, neko no te mo karitai youna isogashisanano. Atode denwa suru yo.

Sorry, because this office is moving we are **very busy**. I'll call later.

Neko o kaburu (猫をかぶる)

This idiom '*neko o kaburu*' has the verb '*Kaburu*' 「被る」, which means to wear something on the head. *Kaburu* can also be interpreted as 'cover.' Then there is the particle *o* 「を」, which functions to show the object. Therefore, this idiom is interpreted as 'covering the cat face.' This is interpreted as something that is 'pretend innocence' and 'to play the hypocrite.'

Example:

無理を承知で頼むのだから、何を言われても猫をかぶって紳士でとおせ。

Muri wo shouchi de tanomu no dakara, nani wo iwaretemo neko wo kabutte shinshi de toose.

Since you ask with a notice that unreasonable, whatever you say, **pretend innocence** and be gentleman.

Neko ni matatabi (猫にまたたび)

This idiom is formed from the noun '*neko*' and *matatabi* 「またたび」. *Matatabi* is catnip. This plant is liked by cats because it can be used to cure diseases in cats. This idiom lexically means 'catnip for cats.' It idiomatically means 'attention' or 'pleasure.'

Example:

猫にまたたび、うちの子供にはテレビゲーム。

Neko ni matatabi, uchi no kodomo ni terebigemu.

My child loves television Games like catnip for cats.

Neko ni katsuobushi (猫に鰹節)

The lexical meaning of this idiom is ‘a piece of *bonito* for cats,’ and its idiomatic meaning is something that should not be careless.

Example:

食いしん坊と豪華な料理を家に残すなんて、猫に鰹節だ

Kuishinbō to gōkana ryōri o ie ni nokosu nante, Eko ni katsuobushi da.

Leaving glutton and gorgeous food at Home must not be careless.

The idiom above uses a metaphorical style that shows similarity. In a lexical meaning, 'a piece of *bonito* (fish) for a cat' has something in common with the state of not being careless. The word 'piece of fish for a cat' can reflect as a dangerous situation if left unchecked, like when we give a piece of fish to a cat, the cat will surely devour the fish right away. Therefore, we must not be careless about something that has the potential to endanger or harm us.

Neko no kubi ni suzu o tsukeru (猫の首に鈴を付ける)

The lexical meaning is 'putting a bell around the cat's neck', and its idiomatic meaning is something that is well planned and must be executed properly. The idiom above is based on the allegory of the group of mice that are discussing in dealing with cats. The results of the discussion of the mice agreed to put a bell on the neck of the cat to be a danger marker for mice when the cat comes. However, no one dared to put a bell on the cat's neck. This idiom explains that many things are easy to talk about but difficult at the execution stage. This idiom shows using a metaphorical style of language that shows similarity or similarity, where in a lexical meaning 'putting a bell on a cat's neck' has similarities to the condition that no one dares.

Neko on Go ippiki inai (猫の子一匹いない)

The lexical meaning of this idiom is 'even a kitten, does not exist' and the idiomatic meaning 'there is no person /no one.'

Example:

休暇中、少し自然の空気を吸いたい思い車を走らせ山間部に来たが、猫の小一匹いないほど閑散としている。

Kyūka-chū, sukoshi shizen no kūki o suitai omoi-sha o hashira se sankan-bu ni kitaga, neko no ko ichi-biki inai hodo kansanto shite iru.

During the holidays, I drove a car that wanted to breathe a little natural air and came to the mountains, but it was so quiet that **nobody** was.

The idiom above uses a metaphorical style that shows similarities. In lexical meaning 'kitten that does not exist' has similarities to the state of "there is no person."

Neko o koroseba shichi dai tataru (猫を殺せば七代祟る)

The lexical meaning of this idiom is 'if killing a cat, it will be condemned 7 generations' and its idiomatic meaning 'evil deeds will have a bad effect on the future.' The idiom above uses a metaphorical style of language that shows similarity or similarity, where the lexical meaning 'killing cats' has similarities to being cursed. This idiom is related to Japanese folklore, which tells us that cats are magical animals.

Neko o ou yori sakana o noke yo and Neko o ou yori sara o hike

(猫を追うより魚をのけよ, および猫を追うより皿を引け)

The lexical meaning of these two idioms is the same idiomatically, meaning that solving the root cause of the problem is better than solving the problem. Lexically is 'Neko o ou yori sakana o noke yo' means 'rather than Chase the cat, Way The fish,' and 'Neko o ou yori sara o hike' means 'Pull the dish than chasing a cat'.

This idiom uses the style of metonymy, which shows the relationship between fish and plates by attracting cat food. The lexical meaning 'taking fish & pulling plates' is similar to idiomatically the meaning of 'root of the problem'.

4 Conclusion

There are 13 idioms that have the word 'neko' in Japanese. 9 idioms are metaphors and 4 idioms are metonymy. No synecdoche idioms were found in the data. From the results of the analysis of the meaning of idioms with the word *neko* there are different idioms between lexical and idiomatic meanings. However, there is a link between lexical meaning and idiomatic meaning. The idiomatic meaning is formed from the lexical and cultural aspects and history of Japanese society.

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