

Historical and Linguistic Analysis of the Common and Vernacular Names of Large Carnivores: With Special Reference to Lion, Tiger, Leopard and Cheetah

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Article type: Review Article

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Abstract

Common and vernacular animal names are shaped by biological observation, historical literature, cultural practice and language change. In India, terms used for large carnivores may vary between Sanskrit, Hindi, Urdu and regional languages, and the same term may not always correspond to one biological species. This review examines the historical and ethnolinguistic dimensions of names associated with four focal carnivores: the lion (*Panthera leo*), tiger (*Panthera tigris*), leopard (*Panthera pardus*) and cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*). This documentary review synthesizes evidence from zoological checklists, taxonomic reports, historical lexicons, dictionaries, natural-history literature and carefully documented community knowledge. The paper distinguishes scientific nomenclature from common naming and argues that a vernacular name should not be labelled incorrect without considering its historical and regional context. The Zoological Survey of India and the IUCN Cat Specialist Group provide the biological reference framework, while South Asian mammal-name compilations and Sanskrit lexicographical sources provide historical and linguistic evidence. The review identifies name overlap, translation, semantic change and differences between literary and contemporary usage as important sources of confusion. A verified multilingual name-species database is proposed for wildlife education, conservation communication and future ethnobiological research.

Keywords: animal nomenclature; vernacular names; ethnolinguistics; ethnobiology; carnivores; lion; tiger; leopard; cheetah; India

1. Introduction

Names are among the most visible ways in which human societies classify the natural world. Scientific names are intended to provide internationally consistent biological references, whereas common and vernacular names are embedded in language, place, history and culture. Consequently, a single animal may have several names, and a single name may refer to different animals in different regions or historical periods.

This issue is particularly important for large carnivores. Lion, tiger, leopard and cheetah are widely discussed in Indian education, media, tourism, folklore and conservation programmes. Their names are sometimes translated directly from one language to another, even when the source term has a wider or historically different meaning. Such usage can create confusion between biological identification and cultural naming.

The present paper treats the question of correct naming as a problem requiring separate linguistic and zoological analysis. The biological baseline is provided by currently accepted scientific names. The linguistic component examines the origin, meaning, distribution and historical continuity of vernacular terms. The purpose is not to replace local names, but to

identify when a name is species-specific, historically legitimate, regionally variable, ambiguous or incorrectly applied in a modern zoological context.

2. Conceptual distinction between name categories

Category	Meaning	Example of use
Scientific name	Formal binomial used for biological classification	<i>Panthera leo</i>
English common name	Widely used non-Latin name in English	lion, tiger, leopard
Vernacular name	Name used in a regional or community language	Hindi or regional terms
Historical synonym	Earlier or alternative name recorded in literature	A term found in older lexicons
Descriptive term	Word referring to appearance, behaviour or status	A term describing stripes or power
Misidentification	Use of a name for the wrong biological species	Must be demonstrated with evidence

These categories must not be treated as interchangeable. A common name may be culturally appropriate while remaining less precise than a scientific name. Conversely, a scientific name may change when taxonomic evidence is revised, without implying that local knowledge is inherently erroneous.

3. Biological reference framework

Common name	Scientific name	Family	Relevance
Lion	<i>Panthera leo</i>	Felidae	Historical and cultural distinction between lion-related terms
Tiger	<i>Panthera tigris</i>	Felidae	Overlap among Sanskrit, Hindi and regional terms
Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>	Felidae	Frequent confusion with other spotted or large cats
Cheetah	<i>Acinonyx jubatus</i>	Felidae	Distinct morphology and historical naming questions

The Zoological Survey of India checklist separately lists lion, leopard and tiger and provides their Indian distributions (Zoological Survey of India, 2025). The cheetah is included because it is central to the linguistic question and has a distinct scientific name and evolutionary history. Taxonomic classification is evidence-based and subject to revision. The IUCN Cat Specialist Group revised felid classification using morphological, molecular, biogeographical and other evidence, while also recognising the practical importance of established non-scientific names (Kitchener et al., 2017).

4. Objectives

- To document English, Sanskrit, Hindi and selected regional names associated with the four focal carnivores.
- To compare vernacular names with currently accepted scientific names.
- To trace the historical use and meanings of selected carnivore terms.
- To identify names that are species-specific, overlapping, descriptive, historical or ambiguous.
- To examine the role of translation, semantic change and regional variation in present-day confusion.

- To develop a standardised name-species documentation framework for wildlife education and conservation communication.

5. Research questions

- What names have been historically used for lion, tiger, leopard and cheetah in South Asian languages?
- Do these names maintain the same species reference across regions and historical periods?
- Which terms are used for more than one carnivore?
- Which apparent naming errors are caused by translation or modern popular usage?
- How can legitimate vernacular naming traditions be distinguished from biological misidentification?

6. Materials and methods

6.1 Study design

This review uses a structured historical-linguistic approach combining documentary analysis with taxonomic cross-checking. No original field interviews, surveys or unpublished biological datasets are claimed. The review is based on published and publicly available documentary sources.

6.2 Documentary sources

Sources should include the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature; current national and international mammal checklists; IUCN Cat Specialist Group taxonomic reports; South Asian mammal-name compilations; Sanskrit and regional-language dictionaries; historical natural-history texts; field guides; and peer-reviewed studies on folk taxonomy, ethnobiology and wildlife communication.

6.3 Name extraction and coding

For every term, the researcher should record the exact spelling, language, script, transliteration, geographical area, source date, literal meaning, animal referent and confidence level. Each entry should be independently checked against at least one zoological source and one linguistic or historical source whenever possible.

Field	Information to record
Name and script	Original form and standard transliteration
Language and region	Language, dialect, state or community
Source	Book, dictionary, paper, interview or archival record
Date	Publication date or estimated historical period
Referent	Species or group of animals identified
Evidence	Description, illustration, specimen, context or oral explanation
Confidence	High, moderate, low or unresolved

6.4 Treatment of community knowledge

Published accounts of community knowledge may be included when the source identifies the language, locality, participants and documentation method. Unpublished oral claims are not treated as verified evidence in this review. Any future interview-based extension would require informed consent and the relevant institutional permissions.

6.5 Review synthesis

Terms are classified as species-specific, multi-species, historical synonym, descriptive term, regional name or probable misidentification. Documentary evidence is compared across source types, language and historical period. Disagreement between sources is reported rather than silently resolved.

7. Historical-linguistic synthesis

Available historical material demonstrates that South Asian animal terminology often contains multiple synonyms and descriptive explanations. Sanskrit lexicographical traditions, for example, record more than one term for the lion and tiger and connect some terms with behavioural or physical characteristics (Devi, 2012). Such evidence indicates that historical nomenclature was not necessarily organised as a one-word/one-species system. South Asian mammal-name compilations likewise treat scientific, English and vernacular names as distinct but related layers of documentation (Srinivasulu, 2018).

Modern public communication introduces additional layers of variation. English terms may be transliterated into Indian languages, local terms may be translated into English, and media content may use a familiar name without specifying the biological species. These processes can produce apparent errors even when the original local term had a different scope or cultural meaning.

Accordingly, the words wrong name and correct name should be used cautiously. A term should be called incorrect only when its referent is demonstrably inconsistent with historical or contemporary evidence. Where evidence is mixed, preferred terminology is ambiguous, overlapping, regional or historically variable.

8. Illustrative name categories for documentary review

Term / form	Language or context	Possible referent	Status to verify
sher / śer	Hindi and related usage	Lion; may vary by region and context	Requires source- and region-specific verification
singh / siṃha	Sanskrit-derived and South Asian usage	Lion-related literary or cultural term	May also function as a personal/title term
bagh / bāgh	Hindi and regional usage	Tiger; broader historical usage possible	Requires dictionary and regional comparison
vyāghra	Sanskrit	Tiger in classical lexicons	Historical referent should be documented
tendua / tendūā	Hindi and regional usage	Leopard	Compare modern and older sources
cheetah / chītā	English and Indian usage	Acinonyx jubatus	Historical and colonial usage requires verification

The terms in this table are included as illustrative categories for documentary analysis. Their exact meaning must be interpreted with reference to the language, region, historical source and context in which each term occurs.

9. Discussion

The literature supports a layered model of animal naming. Scientific taxonomy seeks reproducible biological identification. Common English names support public communication but may contain ambiguity. Vernacular names preserve local observation and cultural memory but may vary by geography, occupation and historical period. A useful conservation vocabulary should therefore provide both the accepted scientific name and the locally meaningful name, together with the region and context of use.

This approach is relevant to wildlife interpretation, zoo signage, school material, media reporting and local conservation programmes. Replacing local terminology without investigation may erase useful cultural information, while using only local terminology in scientific records may create uncertainty. A bilingual or multilingual name-species database can address both needs.

This review has limitations. Historical texts may use poetic or symbolic language, dictionaries may reproduce earlier errors, and oral names may not have a single standard spelling. In addition, the four focal species do not have identical histories of distribution in India. These limitations make source triangulation essential.

10. Conclusion

The question of whether the names of lion, tiger, leopard and cheetah are correct cannot be answered through translation alone. It requires comparison of scientific taxonomy, historical lexicography, regional language use and contemporary zoological practice. The most defensible position is that some terms may be scientifically precise, some culturally valid, some historically variable and some genuinely misapplied. The historical-linguistic framework presented here can support a reliable multilingual reference for wildlife education and conservation communication in India.

11. Declarations

Ethics approval: Not applicable because this review uses published and publicly available documentary sources and does not report human participants or unpublished field data.

Competing interests: The author declares that there are no competing interests.

Funding: No specific funding was received for this manuscript.

Author contributions: Dr Vipul Sharma conceptualised the review, curated the documentary sources, conducted the analysis and wrote and revised the manuscript.

Data availability: No new dataset was generated for this documentary review. The sources examined are listed in the References section.

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