



Cognitive semantic extensions of แม่ (mêe, 'mother') compounds in Thai: A corpus-based analysis of conceptual metaphor, cultural schemas, and prototype effects

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the semantic extensions of the Thai kinship term แม่ (mêe, 'mother') through a corpus-based cognitive semantic approach. Drawing on data from the Thai National Corpus (TNC), the analysis identifies 41 compounds in which *mêe* functions as the initial morpheme, spanning domains of kinship, domesticity, economy, authority, origin, spirituality, and pragmatics. The findings reveal a radial category structure organized around the prototypical sense of 'biological mother,' with extensions motivated by conceptual metaphors (MOTHER AS SOURCE, MOTHER AS PROTECTOR, MOTHER AS AUTHORITY) and metonymic mappings (MOTHER FOR HOUSEHOLD MANAGER, MOTHER FOR MARKET VENDOR). Frequency data bear out prototype effects: high-frequency compounds such as แม่น้ำ (mêe-nám, 'river,' 3,803 tokens) and แม่บ้าน (mêe-bâan, 'housewife,' 956 tokens) form secondary prototypes, while low-frequency but culturally salient compounds such as แม่ย่านาง (mêe-yâa-naaŋ, 'vehicle guardian') reveal distinctively Thai elaborations rooted in animist traditions. The study contributes to cognitive semantic theory by demonstrating how universal metaphorical structures interact with culture-specific schemas, and to Thai linguistics by identifying *mêe* as a cultural keyword encoding Thai conceptualizations of gender, authority, morality, and the sacred.

KEYWORDS

Cognitive semantics, conceptual metaphor, Thai compound nouns, cultural linguistics, prototype theory, corpus linguistics

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INTRODUCTION

Kinship terminology has long been recognized as a central domain for the study of language, culture, and cognition. Anthropologists and linguists have noted that kinship terms are not simply lexical labels for family relationships but carry broader cultural values and worldviews (Schneider, 1984; Kronenfeld, 2006). As Wierzbicka (2016) has argued in her cross-linguistic study of kinship semantics, even foundational terms such as 'mother' and 'father' carry culturally variable conceptual content that cannot be reduced to biological universals. Kinship terms reveal how communities conceptualize social relationships,

generational hierarchies, and obligations of care. Moreover, they frequently extend beyond their prototypical referents, serving metaphorical, symbolic, and pragmatic functions in everyday discourse. For this reason, kinship terminology is frequently studied as a linguistic window into cultural conceptualization (Gaby, 2017; Goddard, 2025).

Among kinship terms, the lexeme *mother* has attracted particular attention due to its universality and its deep associations with embodiment, caregiving, and morality. While every society has a lexical item referring to the biological female parent, cross-linguistic evidence demonstrates that the semantic scope of *mother* often expands well beyond this biological sense. In English, compounds and expressions such as *Mother Nature*, *mother tongue*, and *motherland* illustrate how maternal imagery is projected onto nature, language, and the nation. Such extensions encode notions of origin, protection, and authority. In Chinese, 母亲河 ('Mother River') designates the Yellow River as the cradle of civilization (Trongdee et al., 2020). In Akan, the polysemous word *nsuo* ('water') carries maternal and life-giving metaphors that parallel kinship extensions found across Southeast Asian languages (Sharifian, 2017). Maternal metaphors, then, are cross-linguistically widespread, though their specific elaborations are culturally variable.

The Thai lexeme *mêe* illustrates this dynamic with particular richness. Beyond its prototypical sense of biological mother, *mêe* occurs in a wide range of compounds and fixed expressions. Some examples are highly frequent and central in everyday usage, such as แม่บ้าน (*mêe-bâan*, 'housewife'), แม่ค้า (*mêe-kháa*, 'female vendor'), and แม่น้ำ (*mêe-náam*, 'river'). Others occur less frequently but have strong symbolic value, such as แม่ยานาง (*mêe-yâa-naaŋ*, 'vehicle guardian') and แม่โพสพ (*mêe-phoosòp*, 'rice goddess'). Still others serve primarily pragmatic or expressive functions, such as แม่คุณ (*mêe-khun*, 'dear lady') or แม่เจ้าโวย (*mêe-câaw-wóoj*, 'oh my goodness!'). Together, these compounds show *mêe* functioning as a productive morpheme whose reach extends well beyond kinship into economy, nature, authority, spirituality, and discourse.

Why does *mêe* in Thai extend into such diverse domains? Cognitive semantics offers a systematic explanation. Conceptual metaphors and metonymies motivate the projection of maternal roles into non-kinship domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2005; Barcelona, 2003). The metaphor MOTHER AS SOURCE, for one, explains why rivers and primary colors are labeled with *mêe*, while the metonymy MOTHER FOR HOUSEHOLD MANAGER explains compounds such as *mêe-bâan*. Similarly, MOTHER AS PROTECTOR underlies animist compounds such as *mêe-yâa-naaŋ* ('vehicle guardian') and *mêe-sii* ('infant guardian spirit'). None of these extensions is arbitrary; each is motivated by embodied experience and Thai models of motherhood. As Sharifian (2011, 2017) has argued, such patterns instantiate cultural conceptualizations, which are distributed cognitive representations shaped by bodily experience, social interaction, and cultural transmission.

Despite the importance of kinship terminology, systematic studies of Thai kinship semantics remain limited. Previous research has described Thai kinship systems in anthropological or lexicographic terms (Suwannarat, 1995; Thepkanjana, 1993; Gedney, 1964), but few studies have investigated the semantic extensions of kinship terms within a

usage-based framework. Much of the existing scholarship relies on dictionary definitions or introspection, leaving questions of frequency, distribution, and prototype effects unanswered. Furthermore, while Western linguistics has developed rich theories of category structure (Lakoff, 1987; Rosch, 1975), metaphor–metonymy interaction (Barcelona, 2003), and cultural linguistics (Sharifian, 2011), these frameworks have rarely been applied to Thai data in a systematic way. The recent comparative study by Trongdee et al. (2020), which examined ‘mother’ in Thai, Lao, and Chinese, represents a valuable step but relied primarily on dictionary data and a limited speaker sample.

This gap is addressed here by conducting a corpus-based cognitive semantic analysis of *mêe* compounds in Thai. Using the Thai National Corpus (TNC), a large and balanced dataset of modern Thai comprising approximately 40 million words, the study identifies 41 compounds in which *mêe* functions as the initial morpheme. These compounds are analyzed in terms of their cognitive motivation, cultural schemas, and frequency distribution.

Three contributions follow. First, it provides a usage-based account of *mêe* compounds, grounding prototype effects in frequency data. Second, it shows how universal metaphors interact with Thai-specific cultural schemas, answering Sharifian’s (2017) call for culturally grounded investigations across languages. Third, it identifies kinship terms as cultural keywords encoding worldviews of family, morality, spirituality, and authority.

The primary objectives of the paper are therefore: (1) to identify the major cognitive models motivating the extensions of *mêe* in Thai, and (2) to evaluate how corpus frequency reflects prototype effects and cultural elaborations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The present study draws upon frameworks from cognitive semantics to analyze the semantic extensions of *mêe* in Thai. This section first outlines key theoretical approaches, including cluster models, conceptual metaphor and metonymy, frame semantics, and cultural linguistics before reviewing previous studies on kinship semantics and related works.

Cluster models in cognitive semantics

Traditional semantic theories often assume that word meanings can be captured in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. In this classical view, the meaning of *mother* would be limited to ‘female parent.’ However, research in prototype theory and cognitive semantics has shown that many categories are polycentric, with meanings overlapping through family resemblance rather than rigid boundaries (Rosch, 1975; Lakoff, 1987). As Goddard (2025) shows in his recent re-examination of kinship semantics through the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) framework, even foundational kinship concepts like ‘mother’ require explication that goes beyond biological definitions to encompass social and cultural dimensions.

Lakoff’s (1987) influential treatment of *mother* identified several coexisting models: the birth model (the one who gives birth), the genetic model (the biological contributor of genetic

material), the nurturance model (the caregiver), the marital model (the wife of the father), and the genealogical model (the female ancestor one generation above). These models overlap but are not identical. A surrogate mother, to take one case, fits the birth model but not the nurturance model, while an adoptive mother fits the nurturance model but not the birth or genetic models.

This insight is directly relevant to Thai, where compounds such as แม่เลี้ยง (*mêe-líang*, ‘stepmother’) pick out the marital model, and แม่ทูนหัว (*mêe-thuun-hŭa*, ‘godmother’) pick out the nurturance model. At the same time, Thai also extends into domains such as authority (แม่ทัพ, *mêe-tháp*, ‘commander’), origin (แม่น้ำ, *mêe-náam*, ‘river’), and protection (แม่ยานาง, *mêe-yâa-naang*, ‘vehicle guardian’). The Thai data thus exceed Lakoff’s original framework, requiring a broader apparatus that captures extensions into cultural and symbolic domains.

Conceptual metaphor and metonymy

Cluster models explain why multiple senses of *mêe* can coexist, but they do not fully explain why the lexeme extends into domains far from kinship. Here, Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2005) provides key insights. Kövecses (2015) has argued that metaphor operates at multiple levels: it has universal grounding in embodied experience but is elaborated differently depending on cultural context. This perspective is essential for understanding Thai *mêe* compounds, where universal source–target mappings interact with Thai-specific cultural models.

Several metaphors motivate Thai compounds: MOTHER AS SOURCE → *mêe-náam* (‘river’), *mêe-sŭi* (‘primary color’); MOTHER AS PROTECTOR → *mêe-yâa-naang* (‘vehicle guardian’), *mêe-sŭi* (‘infant guardian spirit’); and MOTHER AS AUTHORITY → *mêe-tháp* (‘commander’), *mêe-naang* (‘event organizer’).

At the same time, metonymy also drives extensions. For example, *mêe-baan* (‘housewife’) relies on the metonymic link between mothers and household management, while *mêe-kháa* (‘female vendor’) reflects the association between mothers and market trading roles. Frequently, metaphor and metonymy operate together (Barcelona, 2003). For example, แม่พิมพ์ (*mêe-phim*, ‘mold/template’) is both metaphorical (mothers as sources of form) and metonymic (children resemble their mothers just as copies resemble a mold). Such interactions confirm that the semantic richness of *mêe* compounds cannot be reduced to a single cognitive mechanism; metaphors function as both cognitive and cultural tools whose interpretation depends on the schemas in which they are embedded (Kövecses, 2015).

Frame semantics

Frame semantics (Fillmore, 1982) complements these approaches by emphasizing the background knowledge structures that words evoke. In Fillmore’s account, understanding a word requires access to the entire conceptual frame it presupposes; a word does not carry its meaning in isolation but activates a structured scene with participants, roles, and expecta-

tions. The motherhood frame, as understood in this study, includes roles such as progenitor, nurturer, protector, exemplar, and authority, as well as associated expectations about emotional bonds, sacrifice, and moral responsibility. Crucially, frames are not universal templates applied identically across languages; they are culturally enriched structures whose constituent roles vary in prominence depending on the conceptual ecology of a given speech community. Thai compounds highlight different aspects of this frame. For instance, *mêe-bâan* ('housewife') activates the roles of nurturer and household manager; *mêe-tháp* ('commander') activates the authority and coordinator roles; and *mêe-phoosòp* ('rice goddess') extends maternal protection to agriculture and fertility.

Frame semantics thus clarifies how compounds cluster around shared background schemas, and why certain roles, such as protection and authority, become central points of elaboration in Thai. The frame-based approach also helps explain why certain extensions of *mêe* are culturally productive in Thai but not in typologically similar languages: the motherhood frame in Thai incorporates animist and agricultural roles that are absent or peripheral in the frames evoked by equivalent terms in English or Chinese.

Cultural linguistics and cultural schemas

Sharifian's (2011, 2017) Cultural Linguistics framework proposes that languages encode cultural conceptualizations which include cultural schemas, cultural categories, and cultural metaphors that emerge from the distributed cognition of speech communities. Cultural schemas are conceptual structures shared among members of a cultural group, shaped by collective experience and transmitted through language and social interaction.

For *mêe*, this framework proves indispensable. The animist extensions (e.g., *mêe-yâa-naaj* 'vehicle guardian', *mêe-phoosòp*, 'rice goddess') cannot be explained by universal metaphor theory alone; they arise from Thai schemas of *phi* (spirit) beliefs and agricultural cosmologies that have persisted alongside Buddhism for centuries (Århem & Sprenger, 2016). In Thai folk religion, guardian spirits are conceptualized as protective maternal figures responsible for the well-being of objects, places, and people under their care. This cultural schema maps maternal nurturance and protection onto the spirit world, producing linguistic extensions with no close parallels in Chinese or English.

Previous studies on kinship semantics

Anthropological work on kinship terminology dates to Morgan (1871), who classified systems structurally; later linguistic approaches explored prototype effects and semantic extension (Heine, Claudi, & Hünemeyer, 1991). Wierzbicka (2017) has argued for ordinary-language models of kinship semantics, proposing that terms like 'mother' and 'father' are cross-linguistically foundational yet carry culture-specific conceptual content. Goddard (2025) extends this approach, illustrating how kinship terms in English, Chinese, and Pitjantjatjara can be modeled using a small set of conceptual building blocks.

For Thai, Gedney (1964), Thepkanjana (1993), and Suwannarat (1995) provided descriptive analyses of kinship terms, documenting the complexity of consanguineal and affinal categories. However, these works primarily focused on kinship as a social system rather than on the broader semantic extensions of kinship terms into metaphorical or symbolic domains. Dictionaries, such as the *Royal Institute Dictionary of the Thai Language*, list numerous *mêe* compounds but typically provide minimal information on figurative meanings or cultural motivations.

A more recent and relevant contribution is the comparative study by Trongdee and colleagues (2020), which examined the semantic extension of ‘mother’ in Thai, Lao, and Chinese. Based on dictionary data and speaker judgments, they found that Thai exhibited 10 extended senses, Lao 8, and Chinese 7. Six senses were shared across the three languages: (1) one who gives birth to a child, (2) one who takes care of a child, (3) adult woman, (4) big or important, (5) leader, and (6) prototype. They also reported that Thai uniquely extends maternal imagery into the domain of guardian spirits, reflecting the cultural significance of animist traditions in Thailand. Lao and Chinese did not show this elaboration. Their study corroborates the polysemy and semantic richness of *mêe*, but its reliance on dictionaries and a limited speaker sample left questions of frequency, centrality, and usage context open.

Positioning the current study

The current study builds upon these foundations in several ways. First, it incorporates cognitive semantic theories of cluster models, metaphor and metonymy, frame semantics, and cultural linguistics to analyze Thai data systematically. Second, it advances beyond dictionary-based approaches by using the Thai National Corpus (TNC) to assess frequency and prototype effects. Third, it distinguishes between central senses (frequent, entrenched compounds such as *mêe-bâan* (‘housewife’), *mêe-kháa* (‘female vendor’), *mêe-náam* (‘river’) and peripheral senses (rare but culturally salient compounds such as *mêe-yâa-naaŋ* (‘vehicle guardian’) and *mêe-bíá* (‘cobra mother’). In doing so, the analysis provides a usage-based and culturally contextualized account of how *mêe* functions as a semantic hub in Thai, extending from kinship into domains of domesticity, authority, spirituality, and symbolic meaning.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a corpus-based, usage-driven approach to analyze the semantic extensions of *mêe* in Thai. The methodology is designed to capture both the range of extensions and the relative centrality of different senses through corpus evidence.

Data Source: The Thai National Corpus

The primary dataset is the Thai National Corpus: Third Edition (TNC3), developed by Chulalongkorn University as the first large-scale, balanced corpus of modern Thai, comprising approximately 40 million words. The TNC samples six major registers: fiction, newspaper, non-academic, academic, law, and miscellaneous texts. This genre diversity reduces the risk that frequency counts are skewed by a single domain. The corpus was accessed through its online concordancer (available at <https://www.arts.chula.ac.th/ling/tnc3/>) which provides concordance, collocation, and frequency tools. The present study used primarily the concordance function for retrieving and inspecting individual tokens in context, and the frequency function for extracting raw hit totals. All searches used the query แม่ followed by immediate right-context filtering to identify compound-initial occurrences. Raw frequency counts were extracted directly from the concordancer's hit totals, and concordance lines were downloaded for qualitative inspection.

Criteria for compound selection

Two criteria guided the selection of compounds. The first was a formational criterion: only lexicalized compounds where แม่ functions as the initial morpheme were included. Examples include แม่บ้าน ('housewife'), แม่ค้า ('female vendor') and แม่น้ำ ('river'). By contrast, free phrases such as แม่ของฉัน ('my mother') were excluded, since they represent literal kinship usage rather than lexical extension.

The second criterion was lexicalization: compounds had to be recognized as established lexical items, verified through dictionary entries, repeated corpus attestation, and conventionalized meanings. Ad hoc collocations or nonce formations were excluded. Following these criteria, a total of 41 compounds were identified for analysis, cutting across kinship, domestic and economic roles, authority, origin, spirituality, and pragmatic functions.

Analytical procedure

The analysis was carried out in four stages. First, morphological decomposition: each compound was segmented into แม่ + X (e.g., แม่ + น้ำ → แม่-น้ำ, 'river'). The semantics of the second morpheme was examined to understand how maternal meaning was projected into the compound.

Second, cognitive model assignment: compounds were mapped onto broader models, including kinship and nurturance (e.g., แม่-เลี้ยง, 'stepmother'), domestic and economic roles (e.g., แม่-บ้าน, 'housewife'), source and origin (e.g., แม่-น้ำ, 'river'), authority and organization (e.g., แม่-ทัพ, 'commander'), guardian and animist roles (e.g., แม่-ย่า-นา, 'vehicle guardian'), and peripheral and pragmatic senses (e.g., แม่-คุณ, 'dear lady').

Third, frame role identification: compounds were interpreted within the motherhood frame (Fillmore, 1982), focusing on roles such as progenitor, nurturer, protector, exemplar, and authority. Each compound was assessed for which frame role it foregrounds; where a compound activates multiple roles, the dominant role was determined by examining the most frequent collocational patterns in the concordance data. For example, *mêe-phim* ('mold/template') activates both the exemplar role and the source role, but concordance evidence shows that its metaphorical extension to teachers overwhelmingly foregrounds the exemplar function.

Fourth, corpus contextualization: concordance lines from the TNC were examined to observe collocational and pragmatic tendencies. A minimum of 20 concordance lines per compound (or all available lines for low-frequency compounds) were inspected to identify recurring collocates, syntactic frames, and register preferences. For example, *mêe-tháp* ('commander') frequently co-occurs with verbs of leadership, while *mêe-câaw-wóoj* ('oh my goodness!') appears in colloquial speech as an exclamation of surprise or distress. To reduce subjectivity in model assignment, a second Thai-speaking linguist independently coded a stratified sample of ten compounds across the six broad groupings used for initial coding (kinship/nurturance, domestic/economic, source/origin, authority, guardian/animist, pragmatic), which were subsequently refined to the nine models presented in the Results; inter-rater agreement was assessed informally, with discrepancies resolved through discussion and reference to concordance evidence.

Methodological Justification

Combining quantitative frequency counts with qualitative semantic analysis directly addresses limitations of prior work. Dictionary-based studies such as Trongdee et al. (2020) cannot distinguish central from peripheral senses on empirical grounds. Frequency data from the TNC remedy this by revealing which senses of *mêe* are entrenched versus marginal, providing evidence for prototype effects independent of researcher intuition. Rather than imposing an arbitrary numerical cut-off, this study treats frequency as a continuous gradient and uses natural clustering in the data to distinguish centrality levels: compounds exceeding 500 tokens (e.g., *mêe-náam* ('river'), *mêe-bâan* ('housewife'), *mêe-kháa* ('female vendor')) are treated as central or secondary prototypes; those between 100 and 500 tokens (e.g., *mêe-tháp*, *mêe-phim*) occupy an intermediate zone; and those below 50 tokens (e.g., *mêe-yâa-naaŋ* ('vehicle guardian'), *mêe-câaw-wóoj*) are treated as peripheral, though their cultural salience may independently confer psychological centrality. Second, the metaphor-metonymy-frame apparatus explains why maternal imagery is recruited in non-kinship contexts. Third, concordance lines ground interpretations in actual usage rather than intuition, producing a more robust account than any single method could achieve.

RESULTS: COGNITIVE MODELS OF แม่ (Mĕĕ, ‘MOTHER’)

The analysis of compounds headed by *mĕĕ* reveals a radial category structure with central, frequent senses and peripheral, less frequent but culturally salient senses. The category is organized around nine semantic models, ranging from kinship and nurturance at the core to guardian spirits, power and instrumentality, and pragmatic extensions at the periphery.

Results overview: Frequency distribution

Frequency counts from the Thai National Corpus provide evidence for prototype effects, showing which senses of *mĕĕ* are entrenched and central in modern Thai usage. Table 1 presents the frequency of representative compounds.

Table 1. Frequency of *mĕĕ* Compounds in the TNC (N = 41)

Compound	Gloss	Tokens	Cognitive Model
แม่ (<i>mĕĕ</i>)	mother (base form)	30,084	Prototypical base
แม่น้ำ (<i>mĕĕ-náam</i>)	river	3,803	Source & Origin
แม่บ้าน (<i>mĕĕ-bâan</i>)	housewife/housekeeper	956	Domestic role
แม่ค้า (<i>mĕĕ-kháa</i>)	female vendor	613	Economic role
แม่ทัพ (<i>mĕĕ-tháp</i>)	commander	381	Authority
แม่เหล็ก (<i>mĕĕ-lĕk</i>)	magnet	310	Power/Instrumentality
แม่ครัว (<i>mĕĕ-khrua</i>)	female cook	286	Economic role
แม่บท (<i>mĕĕ-bòt</i>)	canonical text	247	Exemplar
แม่ชี (<i>mĕĕ-chii</i>)	Buddhist nun	213	Pragmatic/Vocative
แม่มด (<i>mĕĕ-mót</i>)	witch	194	Supernatural
แม่เฒ่า (<i>mĕĕ-mâaj</i>)	widow	191	Kinship (social)
แม่เลี้ยง (<i>mĕĕ-líang</i>)	stepmother	190	Kinship (marital)
แม่เจ้า (<i>mĕĕ-cáaw</i>)	oh mother! (excl.)	147	Pragmatic/Vocative
แม่นาง (<i>mĕĕ-naang</i>)	lady / woman	137	Pragmatic/Vocative
แม่ยาย (<i>mĕĕ-yaaj</i>)	mother-in-law (mat.)	123	Kinship (affinal)
แม่คุณ (<i>mĕĕ-khun</i>)	dear lady (vocative)	119	Pragmatic/Vocative
แม่พิมพ์ (<i>mĕĕ-phim</i>)	mold / template	115	Exemplar
แม่แบบ (<i>mĕĕ-bĕep</i>)	pattern / model	100	Exemplar
แม่ธรณี (<i>mĕĕ-tho-w-ra-nii</i>)	Mother Earth goddess	68	Animist guardian

Compound	Gloss	Tokens	Cognitive Model
แม่ผัว (<i>mêe-phǔa</i>)	mother-in-law (pat.)	60	Kinship (affinal)
แม่นม (<i>mêe-nom</i>)	wet nurse	57	Kinship (nurturance)
แม่โพสพ (<i>mêe-phoosòp</i>)	rice goddess	42	Animist guardian
แม่เฒ่า (<i>mêe-thâw</i>)	old woman / matriarch	46	Kinship (social)
แม่ซื่อ (<i>mêe-sǐi</i>)	infant guardian spirit	46	Animist guardian
แม่สื่อ (<i>mêe-sǐi</i>)	matchmaker	41	Social role
แม่งาน (<i>mêe-ŋaan</i>)	event organizer	34	Authority
แม่เบี้ย (<i>mêe-bǐa</i>)	cobra mother	32	Animist / Folklore
แม่เรือน (<i>mêe-rĕian</i>)	matron / house mistress	31	Domestic role
แม่คงคา (<i>mêe-khon-khaa</i>)	river goddess	24	Animist guardian
แม่กุญแจ (<i>mêe-kun-cœ</i>)	padlock	24	Power / Instrumentality
แม่ตัวดี (<i>mêe-tua-dii</i>)	promiscuous woman	24	Pragmatic / Pejorative
แม่อยู่ (<i>mêe-ŭi</i>)	grandmother	24	Kinship (regional)
แม่ทูนหัว (<i>mêe-thuun-hǔa</i>)	godmother	22	Kinship (nurturance)
แม่บังเกิดเกล้า (<i>mêe-ban-ŋəət-klâw</i>)	birth mother (formal)	17	Kinship (birth)
แม่สี (<i>mêe-sǐi</i>)	primary color	16	Source & Origin
แม่เจ้าโว้ย (<i>mêe-câaw-wóoj</i>)	oh my goodness! (excl.)	14	Pragmatic / Vocative
แม่กอง (<i>mêe-ŋwɔŋ</i>)	troops / forces	14	Authority
แม่คู่ (<i>mêe-kuu</i>)	bride's chaperone	13	Social role
แม่เล้า (<i>mêe-lâw</i>)	brothel madam	13	Social role
แม่โถม (<i>mêe-doom</i>)	symbolic mother (univ.)	11	Symbolic / Institutional
แม่ย่านาง (<i>mêe-yâa-naaŋ</i>)	vehicle guardian spirit	10	Animist guardian
แม่แรง (<i>mêe-rœŋ</i>)	mechanical jack	9	Power / Instrumentality

The distribution shows a clear prototype gradient. High-frequency compounds like *mêe-náam* (3803), *mêe-bâan* (956), and *mêe-kháa* (613) anchor the central zone, while compounds such as *mêe-yâa-naaŋ* (10) and *mêe-bǐa* (32 tokens) are textually rare but symbolically potent—a pattern consistent with graded membership in prototype theory (Rosch, 1975).

To illustrate how these compounds function in authentic discourse, the following concordance excerpts from the TNC are representative:

Table 2. Representative Concordance Lines from the TNC

Compound	Concordance Excerpt (translated)
แม่ทัพ ('commander')	แม่ทัพกรีกของพระเจ้าอเล็กซานเดอร์ที่ยังปกครองเขตจักรวรรดิกรีกในเอเชียแถบเมืองบักเตรีย 'The Greek commander of Alexander who still governed the Greek empire in Asia around the city of Bactria'
แม่ค้า ('vendor')	แม่ค้าก็ขายของหมดหาบ 'The vendor sold all her goods from the carrying pole'
แม่โพสพ ('rice goddess')	แม่โพสพสอนให้มนุษย์รู้จักนับถือข้าว 'Mae Phosop taught humans to revere rice'
แม่เจ้าโว้ย ('oh my!')	แม่เจ้าโว้ย ฟังแล้วตกใจ 'Oh my goodness, [I] was shocked upon hearing [it]!'

These examples illustrate the pragmatic diversity of *mêe* compounds: *mêe-tháp* gravitates toward action verbs of leadership; *mêe-kháa* appears in economic reporting alongside market collocates; *mêe-phoosòp* emerges in agricultural ritual contexts; and *mêe-cáaw-wóoj* is confined to colloquial exclamatory speech. Each compound thus occupies a distinct register niche.

Kinship and nurturance

At the core of the semantic network are compounds that remain close to the prototypical sense of *mêe* as a kinship term, including both biological and affinal roles, as well as extensions into caregiving. The compound *mêe-líang* ('stepmother') refers to the wife of one's father who is not the biological mother, highlighting the marital model of motherhood (Lakoff, 1987). *mêe-thuun-hǔa* ('godmother') emphasizes ceremonial nurturance, encoding a socially sanctioned caregiving role grounded in sponsorship rather than biology. Meanwhile, *mêe-nom* ('wet nurse') privileges nurturance over birth or genetic contribution. The expanded dataset further enriches this cluster. *mêe-baη-kəət-klâw* ('birth mother') is a formal, literary term that foregrounds the birth model with honorific overtones. Further compounds extend the kinship cluster: *mêe-thâw* ('old woman') designates elderly women as community matriarchs, *mêe-úi* ('grandmother', a Northern Thai form) attests to dialectal variation, and *mêe-mâaj* ('widow') marks widowhood as a social condition rather than an active role.

Even within the kinship domain, then, *mêe* activates multiple models (birth, marital, nurturance, and moral) which reveal a polycentric structure in which different social roles come to the fore depending on context. Corpus concordances bear this out: *mêe-líang* often co-occurs with evaluative adjectives such as ใจร้าย ('cruel'), reflecting cultural stereotypes from folktales, while *mêe-thuun-hǔa* collocates with ceremonial and kinship terms, underscoring its ritual significance.

Domestic and economic roles

One of the most prominent extensions of *mêe* in Thai occurs in compounds that designate women in domestic or economic roles, reflecting cultural expectations that women, especially mothers, are central to the household and market economy.

Domestic roles

mêe-bâan ('housewife') exemplifies the extension of maternal identity into domestic responsibility. In contemporary Thai, *mêe-bâan* can mean both 'housewife' and 'housekeeper,' depending on context. It does not only denote a woman married with children, but more broadly, the person (usually female) who manages a household. Corpus evidence shows that *mêe-bâan* is highly frequent (over 950 tokens in the TNC), appearing in job advertisements occupationally and in social discourse evaluatively. Other related compounds extend maternal roles into specialized domestic or supervisory contexts: *mêe-riian* ('matron'). Each of these compounds reflects the metonymy CAREGIVER FOR DOMESTIC ROLE, a pattern in which the prototypical nurturing function of motherhood is mapped onto household management roles culturally associated with women.

Economic roles

Similarly, *mêe-khúa* ('female vendor') highlights maternal association with market labor. In Thai society, women have historically played a central role in commerce, especially in fresh markets and small-scale trade. The compound identifies the vendor specifically as female, with *mêe* serving as a gendered prefix. Corpus analysis shows that *mêe-khúa* collocates frequently with market-related terms (ตลาด 'market,' ขาย 'sell,' แผง 'stall') and often appears in economic reporting. Similarly, *mêe-khrua* ('female cook') frequently refers to professional cooks in restaurants, school canteens, and catering services, placing it squarely within the economic domain despite its etymological link to the domestic kitchen.

The maternal role, then, is not confined to biological motherhood but permeates occupational life: the gendered assumption that women dominate domestic and market spaces is lexicalized through *mêe*, and the high frequency of these compounds marks them as secondary prototypes of extended maternal identity.

Source and origin

One of the most widespread metaphorical extensions of *mêe* is into the domain of origins, sources, and generative principles, reflecting the metaphor MOTHER AS SOURCE. The most frequent example is *mêe-náam* ('river'), with over 3,800 tokens in the TNC. Rivers are conceptualized as life-giving mothers, providing water for agriculture, transport, and daily survival. Importantly, the SOURCE mapping here is not purely generative; it carries a nurturer component. Just as a mother sustains life through nourishment, the river sustains communities through continuous provision of water, blending generative origin with ongoing nurturance within a single compound. Thai discourse often personifies rivers as

nurturing figures, parallel to metaphors in other cultures (e.g., the ‘Mother River’ in Chinese for the Yellow River). Collocations confirm this conceptualization: *mêe-náam* often occurs with verbs such as ไหล (‘to flow’) and with names of specific rivers (แม่น้ำเจ้าพระยา ‘Chao Phraya River’, แม่น้ำปิง ‘Ping river’).

Another important extension is *mêe-sǐi* (‘primary color’), denoting the three fundamental colors from which all others derive. Here, *mêe* signifies the source or foundation of a category, mirroring similar metaphors in English (*motherboard*, *mother cell*). Despite its low frequency (16 tokens), *mêe-sǐi* exemplifies how Thai projects maternal imagery onto abstract domains of knowledge.

Authority and organization

Another productive extension involves authority and organizational roles, where *mêe* encodes leadership, control, or supervision. The clearest case is *mêe-tháp* (‘commander’), a high-frequency compound (381 tokens). Literally meaning ‘mother of the army,’ the term designates a general or commanding officer. Although male commanders overwhelmingly occupy this role, Thai uses *mêe* to signal supreme authority and central responsibility. This gender-incongruent usage is motivated not by the sex of the referent but by the Thai cultural model of motherhood as centrality-and-care: the mother holds everything together and bears ultimate responsibility for the welfare of dependents. In collocations, *mêe-tháp* appears with verbs of leadership (นำทัพ, ‘to lead troops’), strategy (วางแผนการรบ, ‘to plan battles’), and metaphorical uses in politics (แม่ทัพเลือกตั้ง, ‘election commander’). Similarly, *mêe-ŋaan* (‘event organizer’) mirrors the authority pattern in civilian contexts, designating the person who coordinates all elements of a project or celebration. The MOTHER AS AUTHORITY mapping, thus, emphasizes centrality and responsibility rather than rank. Its productivity is notable: it extends freely into new political and media contexts, suggesting a living conceptual resource rather than a frozen historical relic.

Guardian spirits and animist extensions

One of the most culturally distinctive elaborations of *mêe* in Thai is its use in the animist and spiritual domains that associate mothers with protective spirits. This elaboration is rooted in the Thai folk religious system, known as *satsana phi* (‘spirit religion’), which predates the arrival of Buddhism and persists as a syncretic layer of Thai cosmology (Århem & Sprenger, 2016). Within this belief system, guardian deities are associated with specific places, objects, and domains of life and many of these protective spirits are conceptualized through maternal imagery.

Examples include: *mêe-thoo-ra-nii* (‘Mother Earth goddess’), the personification of the earth who wrung water from her hair to vanquish the demon Mara during the Buddha’s enlightenment; *mêe-yâa-naaŋ* (‘vehicle guardian’), believed to protect boats, cars, and buses and often invoked in blessing ceremonies; *mêe-phoo-sòp* (‘rice goddess’), the guardian spirit of

rice symbolizing fertility and abundance, honored through rituals during planting and harvest; *mêe-sî* ('infant guardian spirit'), a protective figure associated with newborn children; and *mêe-bîa* ('cobra mother'), linked to folk tales and protective amulets. *mêe-khoṅ-khaa* ('river goddess') extends the guardian model through a Brahmanical layer: the Ganges, revered in Indic tradition as a divine mother, is lexicalized in Thai through *mêe*, placing a pan-Asian river goddess alongside indigenous *phi* within the same protective maternal frame.

Although these compounds are rare in corpus frequency, their symbolic weight far exceeds their token counts. They embody the MOTHER AS PROTECTOR metaphor in a uniquely Thai register, projecting maternal identity into cosmology and linking human family structures with the spirit world. Trongdee et al. (2020) noted this elaboration as unique to Thai, absent in both Lao and Chinese.

Exemplar

A distinct but related extension projects *mêe* onto authoritative originals, patterns, and standards, a model in which the mother is conceptualized not merely as a source of existence but as the definitive template against which subsequent copies or instances are measured. Three compounds exemplify this model: *mêe-phim* ('mold/template'), *mêe-bòt* ('canonical text'), and *mêe-bèep* ('pattern/model').

mêe-phim literally means 'mother of the print' and is most commonly used for molds, casts, and printing plates; in its most culturally resonant extension, teachers are described as *mêe-phim khǎwṅ chāat* ('molds of the nation'), a metaphor that foregrounds the teacher's role in shaping moral and civic identity. *mêe-bòt* denotes authoritative or canonical texts, particularly sacred scriptures and foundational literary works; its use in academic and religious discourse underscores the idea of a source text from which subsequent derivations take their authority. *mêe-bèep*, meanwhile, refers to patterns or models including sewing patterns, exemplars of conduct, and templates more broadly and collocates with verbs of copying and following (ทำตาม 'to follow,' ลอก 'to copy').

The Exemplar model combines metaphor (mother as prototype) with metonymy (the original standing for the category). The moderate frequencies of these compounds (100–247 tokens) place them in the intermediate zone of the prototype gradient, reflecting their entrenchment in educational, religious, and artisanal discourse.

Power and instrumentality

Another productive extension projects maternal centrality onto physical tools and forces. *mêe-lèk* ('magnet') denotes magnetic force, metaphorically linked to attraction and the idea of a central drawing power; *mêe-kun-cēe* ('padlock') projects maternal protection onto a mundane securing device; and *mêe-rēṅ* ('mechanical jack') denotes a powerful tool for lifting weight. These examples show how *mêe* extends into technical and mechanical domains, encoding centrality and force through the same maternal frame that motivates kinship and spiritual extensions.

Pragmatic and social extensions

In addition to the core models, *mêe* extends into peripheral and pragmatic senses that enrich the semantic network with expressive, instrumental, and symbolic functions. *mêe-khun* ('dear lady') is used as a vocative, sometimes politely but often ironically, to address women. *mêe-câaw-wóoj* ('oh my goodness') is an exclamatory phrase expressing surprise, frustration, or admiration. *mêe-naaŋ* ('lady/woman') functions as a polite or formal feminine address term, paralleling *mêe-khun* but with a more neutral register. The dataset also brings to light evaluative and socially marked senses. *mêe-chii* ('Buddhist nun') designates women who have been ordained to observe religious precepts and reside in temples. At the opposite pole of social evaluation, *mêe-tua-dii* ('promiscuous woman') and *mêe-láw* ('brothel madam') show that *mêe* can carry pejorative force, co-opting maternal imagery to stigmatize women who transgress normative sexual boundaries. These pejorative compounds are significant precisely because they invert the prototypical moral valence of motherhood: rather than encoding nurturance and care, they exploit the cultural authority of *mêe* to amplify moral censure.

Summary of semantic models

Table 3 synthesizes the findings, summarizing the semantic models of *mêe* with corresponding words, glosses, frequency ranges, and cultural notes.

Table 3. Semantic Extensions of *mêe*

Model	Words	Frequency	Cultural Notes
Prototypical Kinship	<i>mêe</i>	30,084	Central anchor
Kinship & Nurturance	<i>mêe-líāŋ</i> , <i>mêe-thuun-hùā</i> , <i>mêe-nom</i> , <i>mêe-mâaj</i> , <i>mêe-thâw</i> , <i>mêe-ûi</i> , <i>mêe-yaaŋ</i> , <i>mêe-phûā</i> , <i>mêe-baŋ-kəət-klâw</i>	17–191	Birth, marital, nurturance, affinal, social
Domestic & Economic	<i>mêe-bâan</i> , <i>mêe-ríian</i> , <i>mêe-kháa</i> , <i>mêe-khrua</i>	31–956	Gendered domestic and market labor
Source & Origin	<i>mêe-náam</i> , <i>mêe-sǐi</i>	16–3,803	Universal MOTHER AS SOURCE
Authority	<i>mêe-tháp</i> , <i>mêe-ŋaan</i> , <i>mêe-kəəŋ</i>	14–381	Maternal authority imagery
Guardian/Animist	<i>mêe-yâa-naaŋ</i> , <i>mêe-phoosòp</i> , <i>mêe-thəə-ra-nii</i> , <i>mêe-sǐi</i> , <i>mêe-bíā</i> , <i>mêe-khoŋ-khaa</i>	<50	Thai animist and Brahmanical spirits
Exemplar	<i>mêe-phim</i> , <i>mêe-bòt</i> , <i>mêe-bèep</i>	100–247	Education, morality, authority of originals
Power/Instrumentality	<i>mêe-lèk</i> , <i>mêe-kun-cəe</i> , <i>mêe-rəeŋ</i>	9–310	Centrality, force, protection

Model	Words	Frequency	Cultural Notes
Pragmatic/Vocative	<i>mêe-khun</i> , <i>mêe-naaŋ</i> , <i>mêe-câaw</i> , <i>mêe-câaw-wóoj</i> , <i>mêe-chii</i> , <i>mêe-</i> <i>mót</i> , <i>mêe-sìi</i> , <i>mêe-kuù</i> , <i>mêe-doom</i> , <i>mêe-tua-dii</i> , <i>mêe-láw</i>	11–213	Vocatives, exclamations, social roles, pejoratives

The semantic network of *mêe* can be visualized as a cognitive model (Figure 1) and a radial category structure (Figure 2). Figure 1 maps the nine semantic models with representative examples in the analysis. Figure 2 represents the same data as concentric rings: at the center is the prototypical sense of 'biological mother,' surrounded by an inner ring of high-frequency extensions (kinship and nurturance, domestic and economic roles, source and origin). An outer ring contains authority, exemplar, and power/instrumentality extensions, while the most peripheral layer encompasses guardian/animist extensions and pragmatic/vocative senses. This organization captures the key finding: that the category of *mêe* is not defined by a single criterion but by a network of overlapping cognitive models, with centrality determined by the interaction of corpus frequency, metaphorical motivation, and cultural salience.

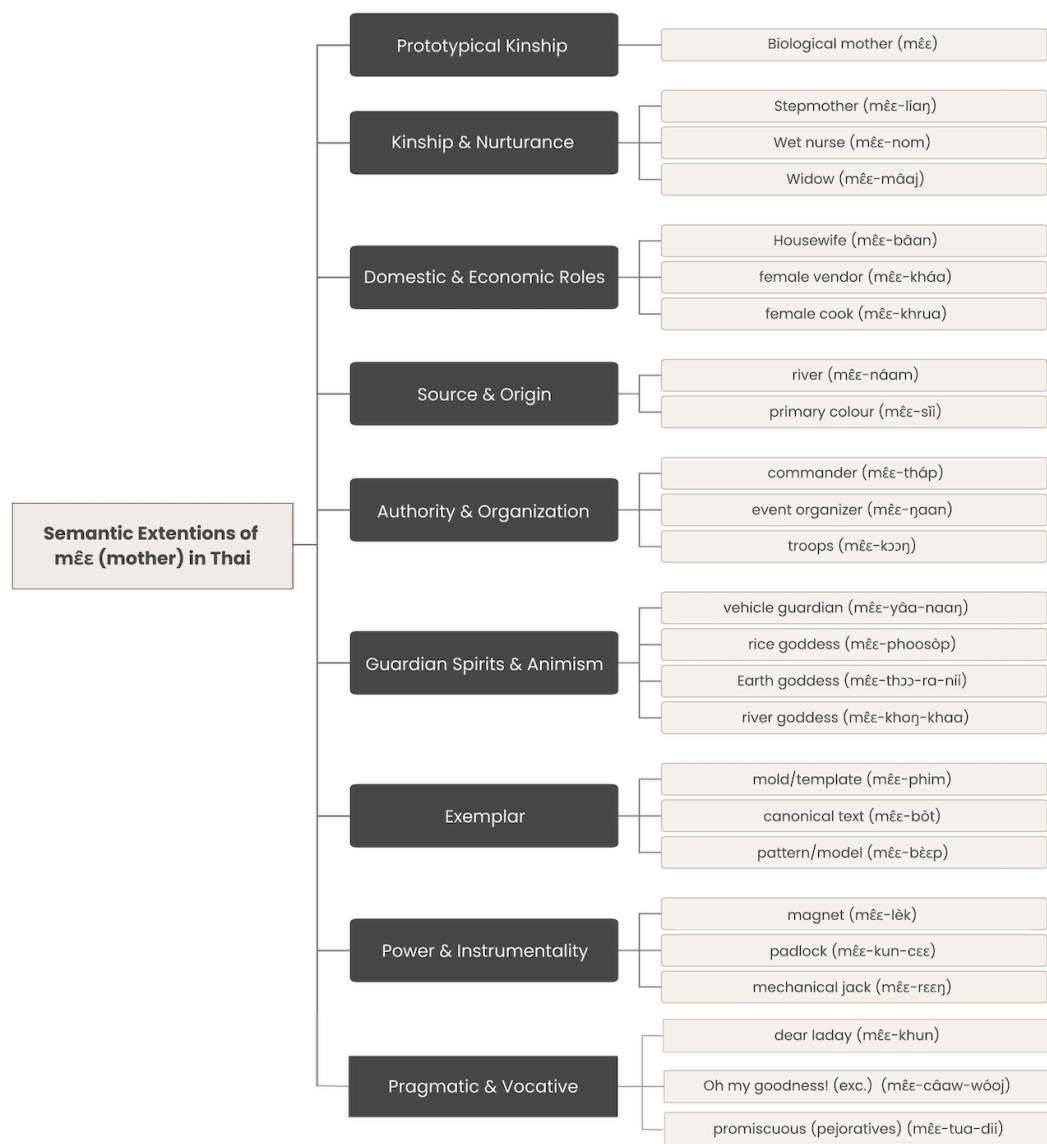


Figure 1. Cognitive Model of the Semantic Extensions of *mêe* ('mother') in Thai



Figure 2. Radial Semantic Network of แม่ (mêe, 'mother') compounds in Thai

DISCUSSION

The analysis of 41 compounds headed by *mêe* in the Thai National Corpus yields a layered semantic network structured by prototype effects and motivated by both cognitive mechanisms and cultural schemas. This section discusses the broader implications of these findings, tracing how the extensions of *mêe* illuminate cultural conceptualizations of gender,

authority, spirituality, and morality in Thai society. It then situates the Thai evidence within broader cross-linguistic patterns.

Prototype Effects in the Semantic Network of *mêe*

The frequency data disclose a graded category structure. Central compounds such as *mêe-náam* ('river') (3,803), *mêe-bâan* ('housewife') (956), and *mêe-kháa* ('female vendor') (613) appear across genres and function as secondary prototypes—entrenched extensions that speakers access almost as readily as the base sense. At the periphery, *mêe-yâa-naaŋ* ('vehicle guardian') (10) and *mêe-bíá* ('cobra mother') (32) are textually rare yet symbolically prominent in ritual and folklore.

This gradient confirms the prototype model (Rosch, 1975; Lakoff, 1987): the category of *mêe* radiates outward from a prototypical center, with domestic and economic extensions so frequent that they form secondary prototypes, while animist compounds retain vitality through cultural channels rather than textual frequency. Yet cultural salience and corpus frequency do not always correlate. *mêe-yâa-naaŋ* ('vehicle guardian') and *mêe-phoosòp* ('rice goddess') are immediately recognizable to Thai speakers and evoke rich networks of ritual practice and cosmological belief, yet they are concentrated in oral and ceremonial discourse that balanced national corpora inevitably underrepresent. A purely frequency-driven model would relegate these compounds to the margins; their cultural entrenchment measured by speaker recognition, ritual ubiquity, and symbolic productivity places them much closer to the conceptual core than token counts suggest. This aligns with Sharifian's (2017) argument that cultural conceptualizations may not be uniformly captured by textual data, and it suggests a refinement to standard prototype theory: in culturally embedded categories, centrality is the composite of frequency-based entrenchment and cultural-schematic salience, not a unitary gradient determined by usage alone.

It is also worth comparing the present findings with the dictionary-based study by Trongdee et al. (2020), which identified 10 extended senses of *mêe* in Thai. The corpus-based analysis reported here identified 41 distinct compounds spanning nine semantic models with finer granularity than the dictionary approach permits. Whereas Trongdee et al. reported broad categories ('leader,' 'prototype,' 'big or important'), corpus data allow distinctions such as separating AUTHORITY (*mêe-tháp*, 'commander') from EXEMPLAR (*mêe-phim*, 'mold/template') from SOURCE (*mêe-náam*), categories that a dictionary taxonomy might collapse under a single heading. At the same time, the corpus approach supports their observation that the guardian spirit domain is uniquely Thai. The key advantage of corpus data lies in providing frequency-based evidence for prototype effects: the gradient from central compounds (3,803 tokens for *mêe-náam*) to peripheral ones (10 tokens for *mêe-yâa-naaŋ*) empirically validates the radial structure that dictionary research could only infer.

Cognitive mechanisms: Metaphor, metonymy, and their interaction

The extensions of *mêe* are systematically motivated by conceptual metaphor and metonymy, often operating in interaction.

Metaphor motivates abstract projections:

- MOTHER AS SOURCE → *mêe-náam* ('river'), *mêe-sǐi* ('primary color');
- MOTHER AS PROTECTOR → *mêe-yâa-naaŋ* ('vehicle guardian'), *mêe-sǐi* ('infant guardian spirit');
- MOTHER AS AUTHORITY → *mêe-tháp* ('commander'), *mêe-ŋaan* ('event organizer').

Metonymy motivates role extensions:

- MOTHER FOR HOUSEHOLD MANAGER → *mêe-bâan* ('housewife');
- MOTHER FOR MARKET VENDOR → *mêe-kháa* ('female vendor');
- MOTHER FOR TEMPLATE → *mêe-phim* ('mold/template').

Often, metaphor and metonymy interact in complex ways. For example, *mêe-phim khǒŋ chāt* ('mold of the nation') metaphorically frames teachers as mothers who shape citizens, while metonymically extending 'mother' to a professional role. Barcelona (2003) has argued that such metaphor–metonymy interactions are widespread in conceptual structure, and the Thai data provide robust evidence for this claim. The direction of metaphorical mapping in Thai is culturally constrained: authority is conceptualized through maternal imagery even in male-dominated domains e.g., *mêe-tháp* ('commander'), which would be semantically anomalous in many Western languages where 'mother' does not conventionally encode military leadership.

Cultural conceptualizations of motherhood in Thai

The cognitive mechanisms outlined above explain the structural logic of extensions, but their particular elaboration is shaped by Thai cultural schemas (Sharifian, 2017). Five themes stand out.

First, the domestic and economic centrality of women: *mêe-bâan* ('housewife') and *mêe-kháa* ('female vendor') lexicalize the expectation that mothers anchor both household management and small-scale commerce. Unlike Western maternal metaphors, which tend to project 'mother' onto nature or abstract origins, Thai extends it squarely into gendered labor. This resonates with mainland Southeast Asian matrifocal kinship systems, where women's economic agency is well documented (Dube, 1997): Thai women dominate fresh-market trading, manage household finances, and serve as primary economic decision-makers in many communities. The lexicalization of these roles through *mêe* compounds is therefore a linguistic instantiation of a schema in which maternal identity and economic agency are inseparable. The high corpus frequencies (956 tokens for *mêe-bâan*, 613 for *mêe-kháa*) quantitatively validate this schema's centrality in everyday discourse.

Second, authority framed in maternal terms: compounds like *mêe-tháp* ('commander') and *mêe-ŋaan* ('event organizer') reveal how maternal imagery can encode leadership. Although many holders of these roles are male, Thai conceptualizes authority through the lexeme *mêe*, suggesting that maternal centrality is a cultural metaphor for responsibility and control. This highlights a distinct linguistic mapping of MOTHER AS AUTHORITY, where the nurturing yet governing role of a mother is elevated to a principle of organizational control.

Third, animist spirituality and protective motherhood: compounds such as *mêe-phoosòp* ('rice goddess') and *mêe-yâa-naaŋ* ('vehicle guardian') exemplify the projection of motherhood into cosmology. Thai animist traditions conceptualize guardian spirits as mothers responsible for protection, fertility, and continuity of life. This is a distinctively Southeast Asian elaboration. As Århem and Sprenger (2016) have documented, animist ontologies in Southeast Asia assign agency and personhood to non-human entities, and in Thai, this spiritual agency is frequently conceptualized through the maternal frame. Significantly, these animist 'Mother' spirits coexist with Buddhist institutional structures that are formally patriarchal. The persistence of maternal spiritual imagery in this context highlights *mêe* as a cultural keyword that bridges two belief systems: the officially sanctioned Buddhist framework, where paternal and masculine authority prevails in institutional religion, and the vernacular animist substratum, where feminine protective power remains central to everyday ritual practice. This coexistence suggests that *mêe* occupies a complementary spiritual niche: it conveys protective, nurturing, and fertility-oriented spiritual agency that the formal Buddhist framework does not fully address, which fills a conceptual gap in the Thai religious landscape.

Fourth, moral and educational roles: the use of *mêe-phim-khǝŋ-châat* ('mold of the nation') for teachers underlines the association of motherhood with moral formation, extending the maternal role to the shaping of national identity and virtue. This compound operates through metaphor (the teacher shapes citizens as a mold shape copies) and metonymy (extending 'mother' to a professional role carrying expectations of selfless nurture). The same pattern extends to *mêe-bòt* ('canonical text') and *mêe-bèep* ('pattern/model'), where the 'mother' text or model is not merely the original but the authoritative standard against which all subsequent versions are measured. Across these disparate domains, a superordinate principle unifies the extensions: the mother as the indispensable center from which value, order, and well-being emanate.

Fifth, the dataset also reveals that *mêe* is not exclusively positive in its evaluative force. Compounds such as *mêe-tua-dii* ('promiscuous woman') and *mêe-láw* ('brothel madam') show that the cultural weight of maternal imagery can be deployed pejoratively, stigmatizing women who violate normative expectations. These negative extensions confirm that *mêe* functions as a cultural keyword in the fullest sense: it carries not only idealized maternal virtues but also the moral boundaries that Thai society draws around femininity and sexuality.

Cross-linguistic comparison: Thai, Chinese, and English

Trongdee et al. (2020) identified six shared senses of ‘mother’ across Thai, Lao, and Chinese. The present corpus-based findings deepen this picture by showing that shared mappings such as SOURCE and AUTHORITY are elaborated differently depending on cultural context, while several Thai extensions have no counterpart in either Chinese or English.

Table 4. Cross-Linguistic Comparison of MOTHER Extensions

Metaphorical Model	Thai	Chinese	English
MOTHER AS SOURCE	แม่น้ำ ‘river’, แม่สี ‘primary color’	母亲河 ‘Mother River’	mother tongue, motherboard
MOTHER AS AUTHORITY	แม่ทัพ ‘commander’, แม่งาน ‘organizer’	母子公司 ‘parent company’ (limited)	mother ship (rare)
MOTHER AS SPIRIT-PROTECTOR	แม่ย่านาง ‘vehicle guardian’, แม่โพสพ ‘rice goddess’, แม่ซื่อ ‘guardian spirit of infants/newborns’	Not attested	Not attested
MOTHER AS DOMESTIC ROLE	แม่บ้าน ‘housewife’, แม่ครัว ‘cook’	Not attested	Not attested
MOTHER AS MARKET AGENT	แม่ค้า ‘female vendor’	Not attested	Not attested
MOTHER AS EXEMPLAR	แม่พิมพ์ ‘mold/teacher’, แม่บท ‘canonical text’	母版 ‘matrix’	mother copy (archaic)

Note. Thai data are from the present corpus-based study. Chinese is compiled from Trongdee et al. (2020), while English is supplemented by the author’s observations based on standard dictionary sources. ‘Not attested’ indicates no lexicalized compound headed by ‘mother’ was identified in the relevant language for this metaphorical model.

Three patterns stand out. First, MOTHER AS SOURCE is near-universal: Thai *mêe-náam*, Chinese 母亲河, and English mother tongue all ground the mapping in the embodied experience of mothers as origins of life, supporting Kövecses’s (2005, 2015) claim that some metaphors have universal experiential bases. Second, the MOTHER AS PROTECTOR OF SPIRITS mapping is unique to Thai, arising from *phi* beliefs which is absent in Chinese and English (Århem & Sprenger, 2016). Third, the DOMESTIC/ECONOMIC extensions (*mêe-bâan*, *mêe-kháa*) are also Thai-specific: neither Chinese nor English lexicalizes ‘housewife’ or ‘vendor’ as a compound headed by ‘mother,’ reflecting a Thai cultural category in which maternal identity and economic agency are coextensive. Together, these patterns illustrate Kövecses’s (2005, 2015) argument that conceptual metaphors combine universal experiential bases with culture-specific elaborations, answering the call by Sharifian (2017) for investigations that move beyond English-centric frameworks.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the Thai lexeme *mêe* organises a radial category of 41 lexicalised compounds, whose graded centrality reflects both corpus frequency and culturally entrenched schematic salience. The analysis combined prototype theory, conceptual metaphor and metonymy, frame semantics, and cultural linguistics.

The category of *mêe* is organized as a radial structure. High-frequency compounds in the domains of domesticity, economy, and natural origins form secondary prototypes near the biological-mother center, while animist extensions and pragmatic senses occupy the periphery, which is textually rare but deeply embedded in Thai ritual and symbolic life. This gradient confirms the prototype model (Rosch, 1975; Lakoff, 1987) while also revealing that, in culturally saturated categories, frequency and cultural salience are partially independent dimensions of centrality. The findings further attest to systematic metaphor–metonymy interaction (Barcelona, 2003) and underscore the necessity of integrating cultural linguistics (Sharifian, 2011, 2017): the animist, authority, and gendered-labor extensions resist explanation by universal metaphor theory alone.

The study identifies *mêe* as a cultural keyword whose extensions encode Thai conceptualizations of nurturance, responsibility, and authority across social, economic, and spiritual domains.

Three limitations deserve acknowledgment. First, the TNC draws predominantly on written texts, meaning that extensions prevalent in spoken Thai such as slang, youth language, and emerging uses of *uaj* as a term of admiration in online and LGBTQ+ communities likely escape the present analysis. Second, the corpus underrepresents ritual, oral, and regional discourse, so compounds such as *mêe-sít* ('infant guardian spirit') and *mêe-phoosòp* ('rice goddess') appear infrequently despite their prominence in ceremonial and agricultural contexts. Third, the inclusion of regional forms such as *mêe-úi* ('grandmother'), which is Northern Thai, raises questions about dialectal variation in the *mêe* network that a national corpus alone cannot resolve; future research drawing on regional corpora would be needed to map the full dialectal range of *mêe* compounds. The gap between textual frequency and symbolic weight is itself a theoretically telling finding: prototype effects in culturally embedded categories cannot be captured by frequency alone, since compounds of high symbolic salience often circulate primarily in the ritual, oral, and regional registers that balanced national corpora inevitably underrepresent.

Several directions for future research follow. Psycholinguistic experiments (priming, reaction-time measurements) could test whether speakers process central compounds faster than peripheral ones, providing converging evidence for the proposed radial structure. Ethnographic fieldwork in communities where animist practices remain vital could capture ritual uses that written corpora miss. A diachronic analysis using historical Thai texts—for instance, corpora from the Ayutthaya or early Rattanakosin periods—could trace whether the SOURCE metaphor preceded the AUTHORITY metaphor, illuminating the directionality of semantic extension. A pilot study on social media (Twitter/X, Facebook, TikTok) could document how *uaj* functions as a contemporary marker of admiration or hono-

rary status, particularly within Thailand’s LGBTQ+ communities, where ‘Mother’ culture in drag and pop contexts represents a potentially productive new domain of extension.

Finally, systematic comparison with Lao, Khmer, Burmese, and Vietnamese—all sharing the Southeast Asian animist substrate—could reveal areal patterns of maternal metaphor elaboration, advancing Sharifian’s (2017) vision of Cultural Linguistics as a framework for understanding how distributed cultural cognition is instantiated across languages.

In sum, the 41 compounds examined here reveal *mêe* as far more than a kinship term. It is a conceptual hub through which Thai speakers organize ideas about origin, care, authority, and the sacred—a single syllable that carries the weight of an entire cultural worldview.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author gratefully acknowledges the Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, as the source of the Thai National Corpus data utilized in this study. This research also received a Certificate of Exemption from the Payap University Research Ethics Committee (PYU_REC No. 69/029).

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author declares the use of Claude (Anthropic) for assistance with literature synthesis and language editing during the preparation of this manuscript. The final manuscript has been reviewed and approved by the author to ensure accuracy and integrity.

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How to cite this article:

Peerachachayanee, S. (2026). Cognitive semantic extensions of แม่ (mâe, 'mother') compounds in Thai: A corpus-based analysis of conceptual metaphor, cultural schemas, and prototype effects. *Journal of Language and Culture*, 45(2), 1-26.

Received: 5 March 2026

Revised: 24 April 2026

Accepted: 22 May 2026

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