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Animal proverbs

A cross-cultural perspective

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Shorter Article

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Introduction

Proverbs exist in a plethora of languages to express worldly wisdom, frequently in a metaphorical way. A number of proverbs are documented in more than one language since speakers adopt them from cultures they have been in contact with. The focus of the present study is on animal proverbs in English which have a foreign equivalent in another language, such as French, Latin, Greek, Japanese or Arabic. The *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* (henceforth referred to as the *ODP*), edited by Jennifer Speake in 2015, is a valuable source for collecting the variety of animal proverbs which have become established in English over time.

For proverbs that are recorded in more than one language, it is often difficult to assess the direction of the borrowing process. For example, the introduction of a number of Latin and Greek proverbs into English and other languages was due to the publication of *The Adages*, a collection of classical proverbs compiled by the Dutch humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam during the Renaissance.

The present paper relies on a lexicographical sample of 42 animal proverbs listed in the *ODP*. The *ODP* developed from the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*, first published in 1982 (see also Speake, 2015: v). The *ODP* not only provides information about the etymology of the different proverbs, but also a number of illustrative quotations from a diversity of sources (e.g. novels, newspapers or the Internet) which illustrate the typical use of the proverbs over time. In the editor's preface to the *ODP*:

> Research for this edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* has shown that the proverb in Britain and North America is as vital and varied as ever. The evolution of the present *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* from the *Concise* over more than three decades has paralleled the evolution of the Internet as a research tool of unique usefulness and scope . . . Online resources from around the world have provided invaluable evidence for the continued currency of an appreciable number of older sayings that had seemed, from the lack of print evidence, to be obsolescent at the end of the twentieth century (Speake 2015: v).

The present study sets out to compare animal proverbs used in English with their equivalents in other languages. The comprehensive linguistic evidence in the *ODP* was taken into account, in order to obtain an overview of the origin, meaning and use of the various proverbs from their earliest recorded use until today. This has to date been neglected in existing investigations.

Animal proverbs with a foreign equivalent

As already mentioned, the *ODP* includes 42 animal proverbs which have a foreign equivalent. Of these, 17 have an equivalent in Latin and/or Greek, and 12 may go back to French. In addition, there are 13 proverbs from a variety of other languages, ranging from Japanese (3), (West) African languages (3), Chinese (2) and Arabic (1), to Russian (1), Inuit (1), Indian (1) and Native American (1). Figure 1 presents an overview of the chronological distribution of these animal proverbs in English.

Before the 13th century, there are no foreign-derived animal proverbs in the *ODP*. The earliest proverb in the sample of *ODP* entries is *The cat would eat fish, but would not wet her feet*, first recorded in English in about 1225. It corresponds to the medieval Latin *Catus amat piscem, sed non vult tingere plantas*, 'the cat loves a fish, but does not wish to wet its feet' (see *ODP*), used with reference to the need to endure anger or take risks to achieve a particular aim.

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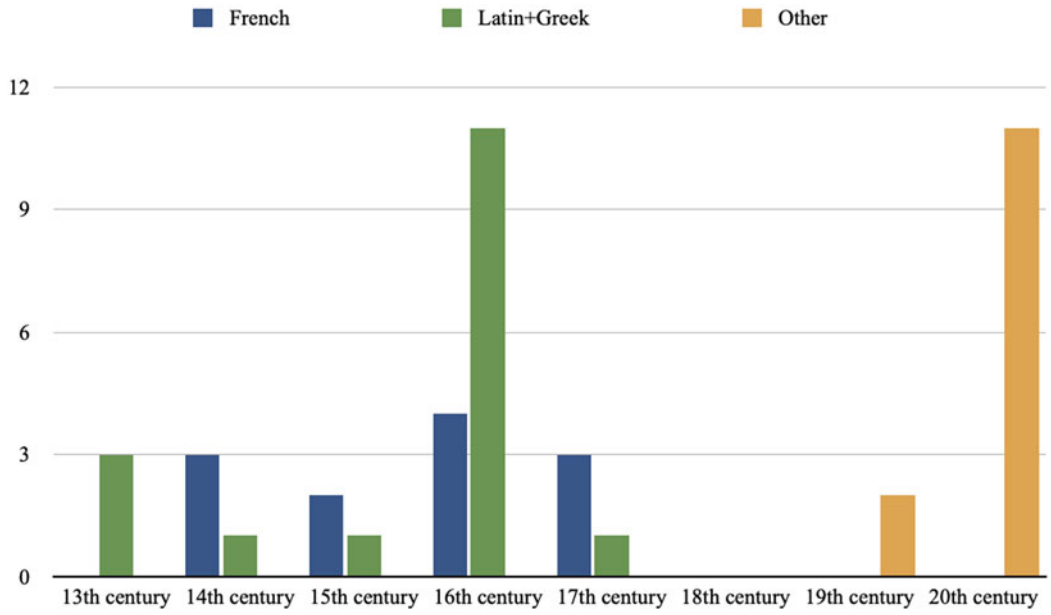


Figure 1. Chronological distribution of the animal proverbs with an equivalent in a foreign language

The French-derived proverbs studied mostly date from the Early Modern English period, with some from the Middle English period. The latest animal proverb with a French equivalent dates from 1666, which coincides with the main period of contact between French and English. The proverbs with a Latin equivalent were also borrowed from the Middle English period to the Renaissance, again with a climax in the 16th century, with the last proverb dating from 1616. This reflects the growing interest in antiquity and the classical languages in Early Modern English, which led to a high number of borrowings from Latin and Greek. The adoption of Latin and Greek proverbs reached its peak a little later than that of the proverbs originating from French.

The borrowing of proverbs from languages other than French, Latin or Greek started in the later decades of the 19th century, with a peak in the 20th century. The latest proverb among the *ODP* entries is the Japanese-derived *A clever hawk hides its claws*, implying that you should hide your best skills until the time is right. It has been documented in English since 1994.

Tables 1, 2 and 3 provide an overview of the English animal sayings with their corresponding expressions in Latin, Greek and French. The *ODP* also contains a number of proverbs for which no original saying has been identified. In these cases, only the possible source language or culture is indicated (see Table 4). The various *ODP* entries are arranged in chronological order. For each proverb, the first recorded use is given.

The proverbs which date back to Latin or Greek include a variety of animals, such as bees, birds, fish, cats, cocks, chicken, dogs, eagles, flies and horses, as well as some animals that do not occur in Western Europe, such as a leopard. All the proverbs which ultimately date back to Greek were first recorded in the 16th century; all of them show a corresponding Latin translation equivalent in Erasmus' *Adages* (see *ODP*).

In general, the proverbs with an equivalent expression in French include common (farm) animals of Europe, such as dogs, cats or horses. Examples are *A barking dog never bites*, *When the cat's away, the mice will play* and *Three things are not to be trusted: a cow's horn, a dog's tooth, and a horse's hoof.*

The proverbs in Table 4 tend to focus on local common animals of the relevant regions, such as a camel in the Arabic saying or a caribou in the Inuit proverb. These have mostly been documented in English since the 20th century, with only two earlier borrowings from 1882 and 1892. This might be due to the contact between English and other languages, which mainly started after the 18th century.

The horse sayings tend to be associated with freedom and loss. The fish is either eaten or stinks. Both bees and flies are associated with honey; the sweetness of honey is presented as attractive to insects. Sayings including animals that can be dangerous to humans (e.g. crocodiles, wolves, lions) usually focus on this association, and the corresponding proverbs therefore often reveal a warning tone.

Usually the proverbs under scrutiny portray relationships between animals or between animals and humans. Most of them are metaphorical in nature and reflect human behavior. From a semantic point of view, three overarching tendencies can be identified: firstly, the relationship 'predator–prey' seems to be a very frequent dichotomy explored in animal proverbs. Examples are *The caribou feeds the wolf, but it is the wolf who keeps the caribou strong*, which has its origins in Inuit, and *It doesn't matter if a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice*, a proverb of Chinese provenance that emphasizes pragmatism (see *ODP*). In the different proverbs, the cat is usually seen as a predator (of mice or fish). Muhammad and Rashid (2014: 341) confirm that cat metaphors in proverbs tend to

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Table 1. English proverbs with a Latin equivalent

	English proverb	First recorded use in English	Latin equivalent	First recorded use in Latin
1	The cat would eat fish, but would not wet her feet	circa 1225	Catus amat piscem, sed non vult tingere plantas, 'the cat loves a fish, but does not wish to wet its feet'	medieval Latin
2	Every cock will crow upon its own dunghill	circa 1250	Gallum in suo sterquilinio plurimum posse, 'the cock is most powerful on his own dunghill'	Seneca, *Apocolocyntosis*
3	It's an ill bird that fouls its own nest	circa 1250	Nidos commaculans inmundus habebitur ales, 'the bird is unclean that soils its nest'	medieval Latin
4	While the grass grows, the steed starves	circa 1350	Dum gramen crescit, equus in moriendo quiescit, 'while the grass grows, the horse lies dying'	from medieval Latin
5	A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush	circa 1450	Plus valet in manibus avis unica quam dupla silvis, 'one bird in the hands is worth more than two in the woods'	13th-century Latin
6	If you run after two hares you will catch neither	1509	Duos insequens lepores, neutrum capit, 'he who chases two hares catches neither'	Erasmus, *Adages*
7	Never look a gift horse in the mouth	circa 1510	Noli … ut vulgare proverbium est, equi dentes inspicere donati, 'do not, as the common proverb says, look at the teeth of a gift horse'	about 420
8	Dog does not eat dog	1543	Canis caninam non est, 'a dog does not eat dog's flesh'	Varro, *De Lingua Latina*
9	The leopard does not change his spots	1546	Lupus pilum mutat, non mentem, 'the wolf changes his coat, not his nature'	Not dated in the *ODP*
10	Eagles don't catch flies	1563	Aquila non captat muscas, 'the eagle does not catch flies'	Erasmus, *Adages*
11	Don't count your chickens before they are hatched	1570	Ad praesens ova, cras pullis sunt meliora, 'eggs today are better than chickens tomorrow'	via French in 1532
12	If you lie down with dogs, you will get up with fleas	1573	Qui cum canibus concumbunt cum pulicibus surgent, 'they who lie with dogs will rise with fleas'	Not dated in the *ODP*
13	Fish and guests smell after three days	1580	Nam hospes nullus tam in amici hospitium devorti potest, quin, ubi triduom continuom fuerit, iam odiosus siet, 'no host can be hospitable enough to prevent a friend who has descended on him from becoming tiresome after three days'	Plautus, *Miles Gloriosus*
14	Where bees are, there is honey	1616	Ubi mel, ibi apes, 'where there is honey, there are bees'	Not dated in the *ODP*

Table 2. English proverbs with a Greek equivalent

	English proverb	First recorded use in English	Greek equivalent	First recorded use in Greek
15	An ape's an ape, a varlet's a varlet, though they be clad in silk or scarlet	1539	ρίθηκος ὁ ρίθηκος… κἂν χρυσέα ἔχῃ σύμβολα, 'an ape is an ape . . . even if it has gold insignia'	Lucian, *Adversus Indoctum* 4; a Latin translation equivalent is also recorded in Erasmus' *Adages*
16	One swallow does not make a summer	1539	μία χελιδὼν ἔαρ οὐ ποιεῖ, 'one swallow does not make a spring'	Not dated in the *ODP*; a Latin translation equivalent is also recorded in Erasmus' *Adages*
17	The fish always stinks from the head downwards	1581	ἰχθύς ἐκ τῆς κεφαλῆς ὄζειν ἄρχεται, 'a fish begins to stink from the head'	Not dated in the *ODP*; a Latin translation equivalent is also recorded in Erasmus' *Adages*

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Table 3. English proverbs with a French equivalent

	English proverb	First recorded use in English	French equivalent	First recorded use in French
18	It is too late to shut the stable-door after the horse has bolted	circa 1350	A tart ferme on l'estable, quant il chevaux est perduz, 'the stable is shut too late, when the horse is lost'	medieval French
19	Three things are not to be trusted: a cow's horn, a dog's tooth, and a horse's hoof	circa 1383	Dent de chael, pé de cheval, cul d'enfant ne sunt pas a crere, 'a dog's tooth, a horse's hoof, and a baby's bottom are not to be trusted'	13th-century French
20	Let sleeping dogs lie	circa 1385	N'esveillez pas lou chien qui dort, 'wake not the sleeping dog'	early 14th-century French
21	When the cat's away, the mice will play	circa 1470	Ou chat ne rat regne, 'where there is no cat the rat is king'	early 14th-century French
22	Hunger drives the wolf out of the wood	1483	La fains enchace le louf dou bois, 'hunger chases the wolf from the wood'	early 14th-century French
23	Love me, love my dog	circa 1500	Et ce dit le sage qui mayme il ayme mon chien, 'and so says the sage, who loves me loves my dog'	early 14th-century French; might have been ultimately derived from Latin
24	A barking dog never bites	circa 1550	Chascuns chiens qui abaie ne mort pas, 'the dog that barks does not bite'	13th-century French; might have been ultimately derived from Latin
25	A cat in gloves catches no mice	1573	Chat engaunté ne surrizera ja bien, 'a gloved cat will never mouse well'	14th-century French
26	Fine feathers make fine birds	1592	Les belles plumes font les beaux oiseaux, 'beautiful feathers make a beautiful bird'	early 16th-century French; might ultimately go back to Basque
27	For want of a nail the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe the horse was lost; and for want of a horse the man was lost	1629	Par ung seul clou perd on ung bon cheval, 'by just one nail one loses a good horse'	late 15th-century French
28	God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb	1640	Dieu mesure le froid à la brebis tondue, 'God measures the cold to the shorn sheep'	1594
29	Honey catches more flies than vinegar	1666	Souvenez-vous que l'on prends plus de mouches avec une cuillerée de miel qu'avec cent barils de vinaigre, 'remember that one catches more flies with a spoonful of honey than with a hundred barrels of vinegar'	1624

highlight the position of the cat in 'the hierarchical order of the respective animals within the Great Chain', i.e. as part of a hierarchy.

Humans can also be depicted as 'predators' of animals, as in *If you run after two hares you will catch neither*. It reflects the Latin *duos insequens lepores, neutrum capit*, 'he who chases two hares catches neither', meaning that if a person tries to do two things simultaneously, he or she will fail.

On the other hand, some proverbs in the *ODP* describe alliances or friendly relations between animals. An example is *Dog does not eat dog*, reflecting the Latin *canis caninam non est*, 'a dog does not eat dog's flesh'. It implies that people of the same type or profession should not harm each other (see *ODP*). The Indian-derived *If you have to live in the river, it is best to be friends with a crocodile*, suggesting that it is advisable to get along well with the most influential person in the neighborhood, serves as an example of a proverb which describes alliances or friendly relations between humans and animals.

In addition, the opposition 'large–strong' versus 'small–weak' is often associated with the 'predator–prey' dichotomy. For example, a large animal can catch a small one; a strong animal can destroy a weak one. An example is *When the cat's away, the mice will play*, which corresponds to the French *Ou chat ne rat regne*, 'where there is no cat the rat is king' (see *ODP*).

'Hunger–eating' is another important dichotomy implied in the animal proverbs under review. The reader may observe that the proverbs in this category might in some cases overlap with those related to 'predator–prey', i.e.

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Table 4. English proverbs with equivalents in miscellaneous languages

	English proverb	First recorded use in English	Possible origin
30	If you have to live in the river, it is best to be friends with a crocodile	1882	Indian
31	Feed a dog for three days and he will remember your kindness for three years; feed a cat for three years and she will forget your kindness in three days	1892	Japanese
32	The frog in the well knows nothing of the sea	1918	Japanese
33	Trust in God but tie your camel	1920	Arabic
34	When elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers	1936	African
35	The man who has once been bitten by a snake fears every piece of rope	1937	Chinese; also found in Japanese
36	The caribou feeds the wolf, but it is the wolf who keeps the caribou strong	1963	Inuit
37	It doesn't matter if a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice	1968	Chinese
38	Don't call a wolf to help you against the dogs	1975	Russian
39	No matter how long a log stays in the water, it doesn't become a crocodile	1976	Bambara (Mali), cf. other West African languages
40	When the last tree is cut down, the last fish eaten, and the last stream poisoned, you will realize that you cannot eat money	1983	Native American
41	When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion	1987	African
42	A clever hawk hides its claws	1994	Japanese

with proverbs describing animals eating each other or humans eating animals. A common motif is the search for food or imminent starvation, as is exemplified by *Hunger drives the wolf out of the wood* and *When the last tree is cut down, the last fish eaten, and the last stream poisoned, you will realize that you cannot eat money*. The former reflects the French *la fains enchace le louf dou bois*, literally 'hunger chases the wolf from the wood', used with reference to the fact that '[n]ecessity compels people to take unaccustomed action' (*ODP*). The latter is of Native American origin. In present-day English, it is quite often recorded in contexts referring to environmental pollution (see *ODP*).

Proverbs that are associated with 'caution–trust' comprise the third dichotomy identified in the sample of *ODP* entries. It is well known that a significant number of proverbs give advice. Among the animal proverbs examined in the present study, a number of sayings recommend caution. Some of them refer to humility, negation or describe what not to do. Examples are *One swallow does not make a summer*, *Don't count your chickens before they are hatched* and *Don't call a wolf to help you against the dogs*. *One swallow does not make a summer* dates back to the Greek *μία χελιδὼν ἔαρ οὐ ποιεῖ*, 'one swallow does not make a spring', implying that a single happy event does not mean that what follows will be good. *Don't count your chickens before they are hatched* reflects the Latin *Ad praesens ova, cras pullis sunt meliora*, 'eggs today are better than chickens tomorrow', meaning 'Do not make, or act upon, an assumption (usually favourable or optimistic) which might turn out to be wrong' (*ODP*). *Don't call a wolf to help you against the dogs* is of Russian origin, considered '[a] warning against summoning help from forces that you are unable to control, as they are as likely to turn on you as on your enemies' (*ODP*).

Finally, there are some proverbs to do with precautions, trust or what-if-scenarios, such as *If you lie down with dogs, you will get up with fleas* and *Trust in God but tie your camel*. The former is derived from the Latin *Qui cum canibus concumbunt cum pulicibus surgent*, 'they who lie with dogs will rise with fleas', meaning '[v]ices are easily acquired from bad associations' (*ODP*). The latter is of Arabic provenance. It reminds us that we should trust that everything will work out, but at the same time do what we can to ensure a positive outcome.

Conclusion

It has emerged in the present study that the most common animals in the linguistic data are those that are native within the geographical boundaries of the language community in which the proverbs were coined. This may reflect the fact that these animals tend to be well known by everyone; it may also be that they are often attributed stereotypical characteristics in the respective culture. For example, Sameer (2016) points out that from a cognitive point of view, the semantic 'molecules' of animals, i.e. the cultural and ideological associations of an animal, are usually reflected in proverbs through the use of metaphor. Similarly, Ibáñez Moreno (2005) draws attention to the fact that animal proverbs reflect cultural beliefs.

In terms of language contact, the amount of proverb borrowing between English and other languages seems to roughly correspond to the borrowing of loanwords (Durkin,

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2014: 35). However, it is surprising that after the 17th century, the *ODP* does not contain any animal proverb with a French or Latin equivalent, although the linguistic contact between these languages and English continues to this day.

From a semantic perspective, the animal proverbs emphasize above all the struggle for survival of animals, as well as related topics such as risk, predation and hunger and metaphorically transfer these meanings to human behavior. A typical example is the Latin-derived proverb *Self-preservation is the first law in nature*, which basically summarizes this attitude. This is also related to the significance of the Great Chain Metaphor, i.e. the hierarchy of human beings, and associated topics such as predation, which can be used to analyse metaphors in proverbs.

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