ANIMALS IN IDIOMS

ZOLTÁN Ildikó Gy.

Rezumat

Lucrarea studiază interpretarea şi posibila sau probabila origine a unor idiomuri şi expresii idiomatice engleze cu animale, completat cu trasarea unor asemănări de structură şi vocabular sau sens în limba română.

We often read or hear the phrase 'language is a living thing', but seldom stop to think what it really means. Living things grow, change and die, and so does language.

Socio-linguistic studies have shown that the general tendencies of present-day English are towards more idiomatic usage. Thus, educated usage has recently become more flexible and tolerant about what is considered to be correct or acceptable not only in several parts of grammar, but also in style. Therefore it is important to remember that idioms are not only colloquial expressions associated with conversation and informal language, a separate part of the language, which one can choose either to use or to omit, but form an essential part of the vocabulary of English.

An idiom is a special kind of phrase. It can be defined as a group of words that - when used together - have a meaning different from the individual meaning of each word.

Idioms are, in a very broad sense, metaphorical rather than literal: they are effectively metaphors that have become 'fixed' or 'fossilised'. In some cases, it is fairly easy to see how the idiomatic meaning relates to the literal meaning, as the image in the metaphor supports it or one knows how the metaphorical meaning has developed. In other cases, the literal meaning may make no sense at all. In a few further cases, the metaphors in the idioms are peculiar, and their true origins are unknown or uncertain, and so it is very difficult to see how or why the idioms have come to have their current meanings.

If we make an attempt to list some of the idioms related to the broad subject of animals, there certainly are more ways to group them. One of these could be according to semantic and structural characteristics. These groups are not intended to be exact, and a particular idiom may belong to more than one group.

1. Traditional idioms – the types of expressions, which people usually understand by the term idiom. Many of them are almost full sentences (*to seize the bull by the horns* – to face up to a difficult situation, take forceful action in a crisis), others function like particular parts of speech (*a white elephant* – a useless (possibly quite expensive) possession that gives more trouble than pleasure to its owner).
2. Idioms in which certain actions have a specific meaning in the English culture (*to draw a red herring across the trail* – something irrelevant used to disguise or divert attention from the main topic). It is important to note that these actions are not literal and that the meaning associated with them in one language may be different from the meaning associated with

BDD-A2965 © 2003 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:58:09 UTC)

that particular action in some other language or culture, or it may lack any significance. In these idioms the meaning is often highly specific and one should be especially careful with them, being also aware of the danger of translating such phrases word for word.

3. Pairs of words – idioms consisting of pairs of words joined by *and* or *or*, which usually cannot be reversed (*cock and bull story* – an improbable story, unlikely to be believed).
4. Sayings – usually complete sentences, certain parts of which have also become idiomatic expressions (*It is the last straw that breaks the camel's back*, *the last straw* – the final addition to an already difficult or hardly tolerable situation).
5. Similes – idioms which compare a quality, condition, action, etc., with a noun (*stubborn / obstinate as a mule* – very stubborn). These phrases emphasise the meaning of the first word and can usually be translated by simply putting 'very' in front of it. Certain verbal idioms are also similes and function in a similar way to the adjective phrases (*drink like a fish* – be accustomed to drinking a lot of alcohol). (after Longman 1979)

However, since this paper attempts a comparative study of idioms with animals in two languages, it was another kind of grouping that suggested itself as more practicable.

Quite a few sayings, phrases and idioms have the same or similar form in several different languages, since they can be traced back to a common source:

a. Greek or Roman mythology; the Bible; widely known tales, fables or anecdotes;

b. beliefs and superstitions;

c. experiences of everyday life, practical common sense – horse sense! – or the

unwritten rules of elementary decency (which must have been pretty much the same everywhere).

In other cases the same idea, action or attitude is expressed in quite a different way in various languages, especially in those, which don't have a common origin, a shared cultural background or at least territorial contact. Any comparative study of languages has an additional beauty (or difficulty?) if the languages involved are of different origin: English is Germanic and Romanian is a Romance language.

The third group would be of those idioms which are so typical of a certain language (in our case, English) that they can be considered unique and matchless.

I. IDENTICAL OR SIMILAR FORM - SAME IDEA

(as) poor as a church-mouse = genteel but hard up

sărac ca şoarecele bisericii (= poor as the mouse of the church).

The presumption was that a mouse living in a church had surroundings that were elegant enough but was unlikely to find much to eat, since churches usually have no pantry or larder and people neither store nor throw away food in a church.

to show one's teeth = to show or reveal one's true character or real intentions

a-şi arăta colţii (= to show one's fangs)

/ *a-şi da arama pe faţă* (= to reveal its/ one's copper).

BDD-A2965 © 2003 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:58:09 UTC)

Besides the figurative meaning of these expressions, the concrete original picture is also still clear and suggestive: it refers to those animals (especially dogs or wolves) preparing to bite or attack, which raise their upper lip threateningly to express their anger or readiness to attack and fight.

A parallel Romanian expression for this is *a-şi da arama pe faţă* (to reveal its/ one's copper). The core of counterfeit coins was usually of copper, covered/ varnished with a thin layer of gold or silver. As this 'coating' gradually wore off in time, the underlying (hidden) copper began to show through and the coin could no longer pass as a piece of precious metal.

the lion's share = the greater part / the biggest share of an allotment

partea leului

In Aesop's fable it was the lion who went hunting with the swift-footed wild donkey; in Phaedrus's variant his companions were a heifer, a goat and a sheep. At the outset the two / four agreed to share the catch equally. They caught a stag. The lion divided it in four parts. Then, taking the best piece for himself, he said, 'This is mine of course, as I am the Lion, the King of the beasts'; taking another portion, he added, 'This too is mine by right – the right, if you must know, of the strongest.' Further, putting aside the third piece, 'That's for the most valiant,' said he; 'as for the remaining part, touch it if you dare.'

swan song = the last work produced by an artist, writer, etc., the farewell or final performance of an actor, singer, musician, etc.
cîntec(ul) de lebădă

It derives from the belief – found in the writings of the ancient Greeks and the poetry of Shakespeare and Coleridge, for instance – that a swan sings a beautiful sweet song just before it dies. The belief is mistaken, but the expression lingers.

an ugly duckling = a dull unpromising child, project, idea, etc. that develops into a very beautiful, interesting or successful one
răţuşca urâtă

From a story by Hans Christian Andersen about a cygnet (young swan) that was hatched and brought up with a brood of ducklings. It was thought to be just a particularly ungainly young duck and was much bullied and ridiculed for its clumsiness until it grew into a beautiful swan.

crocodile tears = false grief, feigned sorrow, insincere sympathy

lacrimi de crocodil

The phrase is a calque or loan translation that has its equivalent in Latin, German, French and several other languages.

The "natural scientific" superstition on which it is based was probably spread all over Europe by the widely read works of Erasmus. According to him, the crocodile waters the bank of rivers where animals come to drink, so that these should fall and be easy prey for him. He eats up their body and, while gnawing at their head or after having eaten them up, he weeps bitterly over them in false grief.

BDD-A2965 © 2003 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:58:09 UTC)

Other sources say that the sly crocodile weeps copiously, uttering loud sighs and moans in order to appear upset and so lure curious passers-by. When the victims come within reach, they are immediately taken hold of and devoured.

A notable recording of the same belief in English is Sir John Mandeville's description of his voyages in the 14th century, who, by the way, added so many questionable embellishments that for a time to be called "a Mandeville" was to be a teller of false tales. One of his tales was that in a certain country " ben gret plenty of Cokadrilles. ... Theise Serpentes slen (slay) men, and they eten hem wepyinge."

The legend itself, however, is much older than that. The belief that crocodiles lure their prey nearer by imitating a baby's cry was presumably transferred from the harpies, the monsters of Greek mythology and appeared in writing as early as the 9th century in Photius's bestiary entitled "Myriobiblon".

Trojan horse = something that is intended to subvert or defeat from within: a disguised way of introducing something dangerous or harmful
cal troian

The story of the Trojan horse is from Virgil's Aeneid. After having besieged Troy for a decade, the Greeks were advised by the shrewd Odysseus to indicate that they had had enough and would withdraw. Moreover, they offered the people of Troy a large wooden horse as a (parting) gift. Some of the wiser Trojans urged the people to reject it, saying, "Beware the Greeks, even when they bear gifts." But the horse was accepted and brought into the city. The Greek soldiers hidden in it emerged unexpectedly during the night, killed the guards and set fire to the city, thus victoriously completing their prolonged assault on Troy.

Don't count your chickens before they are hatched.

/ **Sell not the bear's skin before you have caught the bear**. = do not believe or expect that success, victory, etc., is certain until it actually happens; beware of regarding money, a benefit or a triumph as yours until you really have it
Nu vinde pielea ursului din pădure. (= Don't sell the skin of the bear in the woods.)

The first English variant of the saying is, in fact, the moral of Aesop's fable about a milkmaid and her pail. She is given a pail of milk by her employer for doing good work, and she knows the doctor will buy it for a shilling. On the way to his house she envisions buying eggs with the shilling; the eggs will hatch into chickens that she can sell for a guinea (21 shillings), with which she can buy a hat and ribbons. Then she spills the milk.

The source of the parallel sayings is a story included among the European tales by a certain Laurentius Abstemius in 1495, which has become an anecdote known world-wide.

Three friends agreed to kill the bear that has been on the rampage in the nearby woods. In order to take courage for the enterprise, they first went to an inn where they ate and drank their full, promising the inn keeper to pay their debt after they sold the bearskin. But the hunting didn't quite come off. When they saw the bear they got so scared that one of them ran away, the other climbed up a tree and the third, who could neither run nor climb, lay down and pretended to be dead. The bear went to the latter, sniffed him, turned him this way and that and finally left him there. When the coast was clear the first two mockingly asked the third man what the bear had whispered in his ear. "Only that next time we shouldn't drink to his skin before we have caught him."

BDD-A2965 © 2003 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:58:09 UTC)

(to make a) cat's paw of sy = an agent employed or induced to perform a difficult or dangerous task for someone else
a scoate castanele din foc cu mâna altuia (= to get the chestnuts out of the fire with somebody else's hand)

Versions of the term appear in many languages and in various fables. The best known is perhaps Jean de la Fontaine's from the 17th century: "The Monkey and the Cat", but the even the French variant of the expression ('tirer les marrons du feu') is much older than that, it can be found in an Armenian fable from the 13th century.

The usual version is that a monkey, who wanted to get some chestnuts from the fire where they had been roasting, employed the paw of his friend the cat to pull them out. Whence also the expression 'to pull his chestnuts out of the fire (for him)'. However, in the early versions the paw usually belonged to a dog, and there is some suspicion that the cat got into the act by a mistranslation of the Latin 'catellus', meaning puppy or whelp.

Don't look a gift horse in the mouth. = take what is given to you (as a present/ for free) without examining it too critically
Calul de dar nu se caută de dinți. (= don't bother about the teeth of a gift horse)

As a horse gets older, ist gums retract, making the teeth look longer. Since there's no possible way to conceal this, the handiest method to establish the approximate age of a horse is to take a look at its teeth: the longer the teeth, the older the horse.

II. SAME IDEA – DIFFERENT PHRASING

(take a) hair of the dog that bit you = a small alcoholic drink of alcohol taken as a supposed cure by sy who is already suffering from the effects of drinking too much alcohol
cui pe cui scoate / cui cu cui se scoate (= one nail takes/ drives out the other)

It is ancient folk wisdom that like cures like, so ancient that the idea was expressed in Latin "similia similibus curantur". Thus, a specific remedy for a dog bite was hair from the dog that bit you; the hair (often burned first) was applied to the wound. A similar remedy from way back, found in old books of remedies, was that if you drank too much of a certain liquor one night, you should have a small amount of the same stuff the next morning.

The Latin prototype "clavum clavo pellere" refers to the action described in the parallel Romanian variant, where the nails are not those of metal we know today but thick wooden ones beaten into wholes previously drilled or bored at the joints of wooden structures of buildings. Hammering in the new nail with a wooden hammer or pile driver, it drove out the probably weakened old one.

(to be) long in the tooth = old, ageing

ți-ai mâncat mălaiul (= you have eaten your hoecake)

Here is the first cousin of "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth" from the point of view of the horse.

From an anthropological point of view we have to consider the Romanian variant as the reflection of a pragmatic social sentence. The so-called "primitive" societies were characterised by the lack of elders and gerontocracy. The harsh conditions of existence

BDD-A2965 © 2003 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:58:09 UTC)

explain practices which might seem ruthless and cruel to modern man, such as infanticide and the suicide of old people who were, in fact, abandoned just like the crippled or the sick.

to work like a beaver = to work feverishly

a lucra ca la cămaşa ciumei (= to work as though at the shirt of the plague)

The beaver has stood as a symbol of hard work since at least the 18th century, as its prodigious feats of tree-felling, dam-building and den-building came to be understood.
In the same vein, an 'eager beaver' is someone who is earnest or overzealous in his work or in pursuit of an objective. The beaver's bent for hard work and persistence is legendary, but can you imagine 'industrious beaver'? No, it is the human mind's fascination with rhyme (second only to its fascination with alliteration) that gave rise to and gives currency to this phrase.

The 'shirt of the (bubonic) plague' was meant to be offered as a gift or sacrifice at times when the pestilence was threatening, in order to protect the village against the danger. Why the haste? Whenever an epidemic haunted the surrounding regions, the women of the village got together and – within 24 hours – spun, wove and sewed a hempen shirt which they then burned in the middle of a yard, believing to have destroyed the plague itself together with it. Besides the significance of an act completed and done with, we have here the fire, the burning itself which was considered to have a prophylactic effect in such situations.

(to buy) a pig in a poke = to buy or accept something without having examined it or being sure what it is
a cumpăra mâţa în sac (= to buy the cat in the sack)

If we take a closer look at *to buy a pig in a poke*, we discover a surprising closeness to the Romanian *a cumpăra mâţa în sac.* The poke was a small bag or sack, and the pig was a suckling pig. The game was to put a cat in the poke, or maybe even more in separate pokes. A con-man would then approach possible buyers with a single piglet, saying that it was a sample of those tied up in bags (pokes) awaiting sale. He would try to persuade the buyer not to open the poke lest the pig should get away. If the buyer insisted on seeing what he was getting, and the seller had to open the poke, he would literally *let the cat out of the bag*.

to kill two birds with one stone = achieve two objectives with a single effort, fulfil two purposes with one action
a împuşca doi iepuri dintr-un foc (= shoot two hares with one shot)

It would be remarkable indeed if someone slinging a stone at a bird got one bird, let alone two. There was a similar expression in Latin nearly 2,000 years ago and there are related phrases in several other languages, with slight variations in the victims of the feat: birds, hares, flies, etc.

III. TIPYCALLY ENGLISH

as mad as a March hare / as mad as a hatter = zany, eccentric,

demented; behaving in a strange, silly or irresponsible way

BDD-A2965 © 2003 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:58:09 UTC)

Both the Mad Hatter and the White Rabbit are memorable characters in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, but the expressions are much older. Some authorities hold that it refers to an old belief that hatters often went mad. It is now known that by working with mercury (a metal formerly used in making felt hats), they may have developed a disease, a tendency toward severe twitching.

However, the expression may originally have been 'mad as an atter', atter meaning 'poison' being related to 'adder', the poisonous snake (viper) whose bite was formerly considered to cause insanity. It might be interesting to add that 'an adder' itself resulted from 'a nadder' by 'wrong shortening' (M.E.), just like 'a newt' is the result of the reverse procedure: it is a mistaken version of 'an ewt'.

Hares, on the other hand, can be seen leaping about wildly during March, behaving in a more unpredictable and playful way than at any other time of the year, as it is their mating time. Some authorities, however, consider that March hare is an alteration of 'marsh hare', a hare that is reputed to behave oddly because of the damp surroundings in which it lives.

happy as a clam = quite satisfied with one's situation; feeling carefree

Here is one of those expressions that are mystifying if you think about them instead of just saying them. Who is to know the state of mind of a clam? The picture is clearer when you come upon the old form of the saying: "Happy as a clam (dug) at high tide." Clams are dug at low tide, so the assumption was that any righ-thinking clam would be in the best frame of mind when the tide was high.

a red herring = something irrelevant used to disguise or divert attention from an event or the main subject, to throw searchers off the track; a diversionary issue

A herring cured by smoking or pickled in a certain way turns red and also acquires a strong smell. Hunting dogs were often trained to follow a scent by means of a red herring that had been dragged along the ground. However, people who opposed fox hunting sometimes drew a red herring across the path of the fox. As it left a much more powerful scent, the dogs would become confused, give up on the fox and go in the wrong direction, following the false trail

a white elephant = a possession that is more of a problem than a pleasure;

something (usually a gift) quite valuable but unwanted, cumbersome and useless that one cannot easily get rid of

Legend has it that in ancient Siam (Thailand) rare white (albino) elephants, whether born or caught, became the property of the king. He alone had the right to ride or use them. At least one such king had the custom of giving a white elephant to any courtier who had fallen out of favour. The courtier would soon be ruined: not only was its upkeep immensely expensive, but it also could not be put to work, being the country's sacred animal.

a sacred cow

A thing, idea, belief, tradition or event considered with such high respect that it is immune to criticism – for no better reason than that a person in authority forbids it or would be angered by it. The expression alludes to the veneration of the cow by Hindus: the sacred animal may not be killed for food.

BDD-A2965 © 2003 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:58:09 UTC)

(the/a) rat race = the competition for success, the struggle to stay ahead of one's rivals in business, one's job, etc., especially in a large town or city.

The rat race is not a common sporting event; indeed I suspect there's never been an organised one. Nevertheless, the rat has such a reputation for ferocity and assertively looking after its interest that the notion of a rat race as symbolic of fierce struggle is a natural one.

In any language – especially for those who endevour to learn it as a foreign language - idioms are one of the most difficult parts of the vocabulary because they have unpredictable meanings or collocations and grammar. As these special connotations and pragmatic meanings are not obvious to people who are unfamiliar with that idiom, the real meaning of the statement is usually missed. Similarly, someone may use an idiom without realising it will be interpreted as critical or disapproving, and therefore unintentionally cause the wrong reaction in the person they are talking to.

Learners of a foreign language often have difficulties deciding in which situation it is correct to use an idiom, i.e. the level of style (neutral, informal, slang, taboo, etc. idioms) or whether an idiom is natural or appropriate in a certain situation. Another difficulty is that of fixed idioms and idioms with variants. It is most important to be exact in one's use of fixed idioms, as an inaccurate idiom may mean nothing to a native speaker. Above all, it is extremely unwise to translate idioms into or from one's native language. One may be lucky that the two languages have the same form and vocabulary – as in the ones from the first group – , but in most cases the result will be utterly bewildering or at least amusing to the native speaker.

At the same time, however, idioms are one of the most interesting and fascinating parts of the vocabulary. They are interesting because they are colourful and lively, and because they are linguistic curiosities. They tell us not only about mythology, history, tradition, beliefs and customs; but more important, about the way of thinking and the outlook upon life of the people who speak the language that has produced and shaped them.

References:

Courtney, Rosemary 1994, *Longman Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs,* Essex England: Longman Group UK Limited

Dumistrăcel, Stelian 1997, *Expresii româneşti*, Iaşi: Institutul European

Manser, Martin 1990, *Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins*, London: Sphere Books Ltd.

Rogers, James 1994, *The Dictionary of Clichés*, New Jersey: Wings Books

Seidl, Jennifer 1988, *English Idioms*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Warren, Helen 1994, *Oxford Learner's Dictionary* Tăbăcaru, Octavian 1999, *Dicţionar de expresii idiomatice al limbii engleze*, Bucureşti: Editura Niculescu SRL

of English Idioms, Oxford: Oxford University Press*The COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms* 1995, London: Harper Collins Publishers

The Longman Dictionary of English Idioms 1979, Longman Group UK Limited

BDD-A2965 © 2003 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:58:09 UTC)