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Animal Proverbs

A cross-cultural perspective

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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 show a foreign equivalent in another language, such as French, Latin, Ancient 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 to collect 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 Ancient 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 which are listed in the ODP. The ODP developed from the Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs, first released in 1982 (see also Speake 2015, p. v). The comprehensive linguistic evidence in the ODP was taken into account, in order to get an overview of the origin, meaning and use of the various proverbs from their earliest recorded use until today. To compare animal proverbs in English with their equivalents in other languages, a systematic corpus-linguistic study was undertaken to identify typical usage examples from a diversity of contexts, including informal language in social media. This has so far been neglected in existing investigations.

From the present study it emerges 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 might be due to 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 with 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 2014, p. 35). However, it is surprising that after the seventeenth 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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