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Animals in idiomaticity: Cultural symbolism, semantic transparency, and language acquisition

Summer N. West*

Abstract

Animal symbolism can be found in idioms, metaphors, and proverbs across cultures. In language acquisition, varied cultural perceptions of different animals revealed in a speaker's dominant language may play an underexplored role in the idiomaticity of a target language. Applying an eco-sociolinguistic framework to discourse analysis, I explore animals in idiomaticity with a threefold aim. First, I reflect on historical and contemporary cultural attitudes toward specific animals to discover how these attitudes may impact the appearance of animal symbolism in different languages. Second, I draw on comparisons of contemporary animal expressions in different languages to analyze the extent to which specific animal nouns or other lexical items within a fixed lexical-grammatical structure of figurative expressions may assist or obstruct meaning for a learner encountering animal idioms in a target language. Third, I address the linguistic relativity debate by offering discursive relativity as an explanation for how users of different languages encounter animals in non-literal expressions. Throughout this paper, I present idiom and phraseology data encountered on the web in addition to data from natural encounters that have occurred during my time teaching or learning languages across multiple countries.

Keywords: animal expressions; discursive relativity; eco-sociolinguistics; idioms; semantic transparency; values

1. Introduction

Idiomaticity, or the quality of being idiomatic and non-literal in expression, requires a speaker to understand certain selections of expression beyond word meaning and language rules. Idioms are understood etymologically as non-literal, lexicalized expressions, specific

* University of Kassel, Germany. E-mail: uk078948@uni-kassel.de

to a certain language, wherein meaning cannot be predicted from the meanings of their individual parts. These lexicalized expressions contain figurative language which can offer insight into cultural and societal views and standards relevant to a speaker's background.

1.1. Animal references in idiomaticity

Animal references are not a sine qua non in idiomatic expressions, as many inanimate objects frequently communicate idiomatic intention as well. For example, the expression *at the drop of a hat* instantiates a sense of immediacy or spontaneity in American English, as dropping a hat once indicated that it was time to begin a contest, such as a race. Possible synonymous expressions could include expressions such as *without a second thought*, *in an instant*, or *without a moment's notice*, all of which rely on more abstract nouns than *hat* to communicate a similar meaning. Nouns such as *thought*, *instant*, *moment*, and *notice* are all abstract in that they are not physically tangible or perceived with the senses in the same way that a concrete noun such as *hat* or another object that is physically tangible would be perceived.

Unlike *thought*, *instant*, or *moment*, non-human animals are as concrete and tangible as humans. They play a uniquely important role in idiomatic expressions by allowing us to "elucidate human behavior in ways in which plants or inanimate objects cannot" (Foreman, 2011, p. 3). Animal expressions can reveal perceptions of animals which may be indicative of the culture in which users of different languages are situated. Proverbial animal expressions, typically constructed as independent clauses, contain context-specific principles that communicate wisdom or advice. For example, *don't put the cart before the horse* is used to caution against getting ahead of oneself and advise that a certain process will require one step at a time. Angwah (2020, p. 3) aptly characterizes such proverbs as "well-crafted timeless expressions that recuperate a people's knowledge or strength in dealing with their daily realities". Non-proverbial animal expressions, on the other hand, can be constructed as dependent and independent clauses and tend to denote some semblance of emotion (e.g., annoyance, surprise, dissatisfaction) in an utterance. *Going to the dogs*, for example, is a non-proverbial expression used to communicate disappointment or disgust that something is losing its value. It is important to note here that this expression does not indicate a positive or neutral attitude toward dogs, but a demeaning stance that positions these non-human animals as less than their human counterparts. Such positionalities embedded within language reveal aspects of the human mindset that devalue non-human animals in ways that have gone unexamined and warrant further attention, especially as societies slowly evolve toward more favorable positions on human responsibility toward non-human animals, both wild and domestic.

Like other idioms, proverbial and non-proverbial animal expressions are rooted in conceptual metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Davies, 1982; Glucksberg & McGlone, 2001; Lakoff, 2006), and emerge out of metonymy, a figure of speech that substitutes the real name of a subject or object with a name to reference something associated with it.

Following Lakoff's (2006) theory that a conceptual metaphor can facilitate understanding of an abstract concept by framing it in a concrete concept, Negro (2019) argues that metaphor and metonymy have created a semantic motivation for idiomaticity in discourse which causes an idiom's meaning to rely on an interplay between the two. While English animal idioms and metaphors both rely on figurative language, they are operationalized differently in discourse, the verbal and written communication that occurs within a given social context.

Idioms are more common in spoken discourse and tend toward fixed colloquialisms used to make a point, as demonstrated in the expression *hold your horses*, an utterance communicating the need to slow down and be patient. Animal metaphors on the other hand can frequently appear in spoken and written discourse and function as a non-literal comparison between two animals, or an animal and an object, person, or situation. *The elephant in the room* is a metaphorical expression that caricatures a large, conspicuous-looking animal as an obvious and uncomfortable problem that relevant stakeholders are aware of but do not want to discuss. The caricaturization compares an elephant within an enclosed space where humans also work or reside to a problem within a particular situation, a problem that cannot be ignored regardless of whether or not the humans want to address it.

1.2. Idiomaticity as a spectrum

Like other idioms and metaphors, animal expressions exist on a spectrum of idiomaticity from opaque to transparent. Opaque expressions have the highest degree of cultural specificity which inhibits the prediction of meaning in language acquisition. A German language learner may encounter this kind of opacity in the expression *unter alle Sau*, literally translating to *all under the pig*, which communicates strong dissatisfaction over something perceived to be unacceptable. Semi-opaque expressions differ in that they carry a figurative meaning combined with a literal meaning, causing the full expression to become obscured by the figurative portion. For example, a learner of Japanese might encounter a semi-opaque idiom in the expression *neko no te mo karitai*, literally translating to *wanting to borrow even a cat's paw*, which expresses a feeling of being so busy that one will seek help from any available source.

Semi-transparent idioms portray a metaphorical function that can be understood through context but not common use in discourse. While it is ultimately up to the users and receivers to intuit for themselves whether an idiom is semi-opaque or semi-transparent, there is a distinction between these pragmatic functions. Unlike semi-opaque expressions, semi-transparent expressions contain a figurative meaning that instantiates literality. It is possible to intuit meaning, to some degree, without prior knowledge or understanding of cultural context. An example of semi-transparency materializes in the Spanish proverb *el caballo malo hay que venderlo lejos*, which translates literally to *sell a poor-quality horse somewhere far from your home*. This expression advises that it is better to behave in an unsavory manner far

from one's community, in relative anonymity. Transparent idioms are distinguished from semi-transparent idioms by their close predicted meaning with their literal meaning, therefore making them easier to understand and translate. An example of semantic transparency appears in the Spanish and English metaphorical idioms *más terca que una mula* or *stubborn as a mule*, used to liken a very obstinate and willful individual to a work animal in the equine family often thought of as less valuable than a horse and associated with stubbornness and inefficiency.

Central to an idiom's semantic transparency or opacity is the selection of the noun, understood in cognitive grammar as "the nucleus of [human] thought" governing how we think, possess, and express (Yadav & Yadav, 2020, p. 147). Our cognitive dependency on nouns dictates how we first conceptualize and then communicate thoughts, with idiomaticity offering a means of turning concrete nouns such as cats, dogs, and horses into metaphors with deeper possibilities for meaning (Fauconnier & Turner, 2008). Idioms which metaphorize animals as symbolic performers or recipients of an action, or as figurative comparisons to literal and specific individuals and situations, offer insights into how humans perceive and interact with the natural world and with one another in various socio-cultural demographics (Hermann et al., 2013; Jørgensen, 2014). Adequately understanding idiomaticity that relies on any element in nature will also benefit from an eco-sociolinguistic framework, that is, a closer examination of how human language has always been intertwined with nature and the ecosystem through sociocultural contexts. In addressing human and non-human animal relations, Stibbe (2001) argues that the ways in which non-human animals are socially and culturally constructed inevitably become embedded within human language and discourse and should be carefully examined.

2. Animal symbolism in early literature and contemporary discourse

Bound up within the symbolism of animals in written and spoken discourse is the presence of synecdoche, a literary and rhetorical element of metonymy that identifies a whole with a part or a part with a whole. When speaking about the endangered status of the European mink, for example, conservationists will use the synecdochical reference *species* to refer to the animal. In rhetorical discourse where idiomaticity is particularly useful for persuasion of an audience, synecdoche emphasizes specific characteristics or functions of the noun while minimizing the individualized wholeness of the noun itself.

Synecdoche in animal idioms allows specific yet ambiguous characteristics in a certain animal to become largely or wholly representative of a wider context or situation. An English example of synecdochical representation is the expression *a wolf in sheep's clothing*, demonstrating how known characteristics of a wolf and sheep are then utilized by an observer to turn certain aspects of each animal into a useful synecdoche and visual metonymy (Willerton, 2005; Benavides, 2013). The wolf is a predator by nature and therefore caricatured as a dangerous menace. This expression is widely used in English to suggest that a dangerous person or situation can present as benign, as represented by the

sheep, when they are really more like a wild canine. A similar occurrence of synecdoche using canines which may be wild or domestic materializes in the earlier referenced expression *going to the dogs*. This rhetorical means of emphasizing that something is losing its value and becoming ruined is typical of political discourse as expressed in *this country is going to the dogs*. The dog is an intentional choice for synecdoche and metonymy. Traditionally, food considered unsuitable human consumption has sometimes been given to dogs, establishing the dogs as bottom feeders. While creating a synecdoche to devalue something once considered of value [one's country or society], this idiom shows no regard for the dogs' own individual behavior and taste preferences and no fidelity to scientific literature produced by animal behavior specialists. Veterinary research from Fascetti and Delaney (2023) among other relevant literature suggests that dogs' appetites and taste preferences vary in the same way as those of cats. The human stereotype of dogs' eating habits which inspires such a reductive linguistic expression is therefore rooted more in culture and perception than scientific reality.

The selection of both wolf and dog to illustrate synecdochical and metonymical inferences can be traced back to scriptural texts found in the Holy Bible:

- *Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.* (*King James Version Bible*, 1993-, Matt. 7:15)
- *And ye shall be holy men unto me: neither shall you eat any flesh that is torn of beasts in the field; ye shall cast it to the dogs.* (*King James Version Bible*, 1993-, Exod. 22:31)

Numerous proverbial animal expressions have their roots in monotheistic religious texts wherein animals are metaphorized repeatedly to communicate wisdom and guidance to followers of Abrahamic theism. A study by Niggeman (2020) on early biblical writings of the Protestant Reformation in Europe investigates Martin Luther's blending of Hebrew and German idioms to convey important aspects of the Hebrew language to German readers. This use of blending in Hebrew and German followed by the translation of German to English in biblical text carries significance in the origin of idioms that use animal symbolism.

Idiomaticity is pervasive throughout the biblical canon, often providing a philological origin for idioms in use today (Pinnavaia, 2012). Another example, found in the biblical New Testament's *Sermon on the Mount* is the use of dogs and pigs as metaphors to represent unbelievers who ridicule and disregard the Christian gospel of salvation (see Table 1).

Table 1: Excerpt from the *Sermon on the Mount* (*The Bible Bilingual*, 2006-, Matthew 7:6)

German (Matthäus 7:6)	**English** (Matthew 7:6)
Ihr sollt das Heiligtum nicht den Hunden geben, und eure Perlen nicht vor die Säue werfen, auf daß sie dieselben nicht zertreten mit ihren Füßen und sich wenden und euch zerreißen.	*Do not give that which is holy to the dogs, or put your jewels before pigs, for fear that they will be crushed under foot by the pigs which will attack you.*

In this passage, the symbolic representation of dogs and pigs is unambiguous. While a disdain for pigs as contemptible and unclean animals can be consistently observed in the sacred writings of the Abrahamic faiths (Lobban, 1994; Barak-Erez, 2007; Easterbrook & Maddern, 2008), dogs have a somewhat more varied representation in the literature examining cultural attitudes influenced by these faiths. Menache (1997) explored the role of dogs in Rabbinical (Hebrew) and Christian writings, finding that views of dogs as dangerous and unclean began to shift toward an appreciation for dogs as integral representations of harmony between humans and the natural world, due in part to the creed of Saint Francis, regarded as the patron saint of animals. Berković (2014) later argued, however, that dogs are never referenced as pets in the Bible but characterized instead as corpse-licking scavengers associated with death, demonstrating how dogs in religious canon have not been represented as friends of the righteous or faithful. Modern usage of the verse from the *Sermon on the Mount* has evolved into an everyday proverb in spoken discourse which advises against presenting anything of value to someone who either cannot or chooses not to understand and appreciate its worth. Variations of the expression using different animal references can be found across languages and language families:

- **German:** *Eure Perlen nicht vor die Säue werfen*. (Don't throw your pearls before pigs.)
- **Turkish:** *Eşek hoşaftan ne anlar?* (What does a donkey know about compote?)
- **Japanese:** *Soreja neko-ni koban da*. (It is like casting a koban [gold coin] before a cat.)

Another recognizable contemporary animal proverb attributed to the New Testament is the English expression cautioning against *making a mountain out of a molehill*, which originated in the Gospel of Matthew and is now used with varied noun substitutions among contemporary languages:

- **Text**: *You blind guides, which strain out the gnat but swallow the camel!* (*English Revised Version*, 1885, Matt. 23:24)
- **Turkish:** *pireyi deve yapma* (turning a flea into a camel)
- **Finnish:** *tehdä kärpäsestä härkää* (making an ox out of a fly)
- **Italian:** *fare di mosca un elefante* (making an elephant out of a fly)

The Turkish variation is the most closely related to the proverb's New Testament origin wherein Jesus Christ is said to have directly censured the Pharisees (religious leaders of the time) for focusing on small details of the law while remaining oblivious to their own blatant misconduct. The context of the verse addresses the corruption and hypocrisy in the power structure of the time, causing Jesus to excoriate the institution for being performatively meticulous about appearing to follow religious laws relating to "tithing", a practice of giving one-tenth of one's regular earnings or inheritance into the service of God for the sake of

those less fortunate (Boddie, 2005; Budiselić, 2014). The insect reference symbolizes this small detail of pharisaical law and its irrelevance to greater issues of accountability in the pursuit of wealth and power over treating others with justice and mercy. Lexically, the phrase emphasizes the insignificance of harm in swallowing a small insect as opposed to the fatality of swallowing a camel. Metaphorically, choice of a *gnat* and a *camel* relies on concrete nouns in tandem to illustrate the point that one will cause little to no spiritual harm while the other will cause significant spiritual harm. Metonymically, comparing a small insect to a large animal displays a relationship linking parts of a semantic domain to one another, as shown by Schultz and Lavenda (2005). It should be noted that the verbs *strain* and *swallow* also serve a vital metaphorical function with their respective concrete nouns, with the former signifying palpable effort while the latter demonstrates a more intuitive action requiring less effort.

In modern usage, the reference to a large working animal to depict the size of a problem in comparison could suggest a historical tendency of representing certain animals negatively in symbolism, particularly in the occurrence of the Turkish use of *deve*, or camel. Theological analyses of Old Testament texts reveal that camels in the time of Christ were proclaimed by religious law to be unclean, and that contact with them should be avoided wherever possible (Yerkes, 1923; Sprinkle, 2000). However, it may also be inferred that the original verse reveals the impact of the domestication of camels on spoken language used during the time of Christ in and around the ancient regions of what is now modern-day Asia, Iran, and Arabia (Köhler-Rollefson, 1993). The camel has also been presented by İnal (2021) as a vital actor in shaping the history of the Ottoman, Turkish, and European global markets, offering insight into the relationships that existed between humans and nature during the Ottoman Empire.

In the Finnish variation, the use of *härkä*, or ox, could reflect the relationship of the Nordic muskoxen and the movement of traders and merchants along the *Hämeen Härkätie* (Ox Road), one of Northeastern Europe's ancient routes connecting Hämeenlinna and Turku during the Viking Age, described by Vilkuna (2001). However, the muskoxen were also historically regarded as a nuisance to the locals due to their tendency to destroy property and disrupt human activity with their grazing habits, as well as their inability to be herded, which made them impossible to be removed (Jørgensen, 2014). This historical human encounter with the muskoxen and the locals' inability to domesticate or remove them demonstrates the challenge in human occupation and cultivation of natural spaces for non-human animals. Furthermore, as Benavides (2013, p. 65) points out, any legitimacy of such natural spaces for these animals becomes disregarded by a prioritization of "the incessant work of individuals, particularly through agriculture … to extract resources". To that end, the presence of the *härkä* constrains the work of the humans, who in turn perceive the animal to be a significant problem.

The *elefante* in the Italian variation may reflect historical perceptions that date back to 218 BC. Historians such as Gowers and Scullard (1950) and Edwards (2001) have written of Hannibal, an army general from Carthage (now modern-day Tunisia) and sworn enemy

of the Roman Empire, bringing his African war elephants through Spain into Northern Italy across the Alps to defeat the Roman army at Trebbia. While the Carthaginians regarded elephants as animals of war, Romans primarily regarded them as a spectacle for entertainment, relishing both the opportunity to hunt them for sport and the theatrics of watching them fight in the coliseum. Unlike the camel in the Turkish variation and ox in the Finnish variation, it is evident from Mussi (2002) that the elephant is more respected in its symbolic use in the Italian variation. Early writings of Cicero (45 BCE/2001, VII.1) revealed that the mob and the crowd enjoyed seeing the elephants hunted but took no pleasure in seeing them harmed. The elephant is further revered in the writing of Pliny, an influential naturalist, philosopher, and army commander of the early Roman Empire (see Ilyushechkina, 2014; Finkelpearl, 2015). This reverence is revealed in Grout's (1997) Encyclopedia Romana, wherein Pliny is shown to have exalted the animal's virtues both shared by and sought after by men:

> The elephant is the largest of them all, and in intelligence approaches the nearest to man… It is sensible alike of the pleasures of love and glory, and, to a degree that is rare among men even, possesses notions of honesty, prudence, and equity; it has a religious respect also for the stars, and a veneration for the sun and the moon. (Pliny the Elder, 77–79 CE, as cited in Grout, 1997, VIII.1)

A similar human likeness to elephants has also been documented in paleolithic studies by Lev and Barkai (2016), and in the work of conservation scholars Hoare and Du Toit (1999) and Wemmer and Christen (2008). It may be inferred from the early Latin writings of the Roman Empire that the elephant does not constitute a significant problem as much as the emotion the animal can invoke in humans, such as fear, shock or sadness over the elephant's misfortune or demise. This may demonstrate a deviation in the selection of the elephant for the Italian expression as compared to the Finnish and Turkish equivalents.

Wild animals, domesticated or exploited to work alongside or entertain humans, are not presented as companions in English idiomaticity; however, pet animals associated with companionship are used in symbolism in English and other languages. In a quantitative study investigating the semantics of animal idioms in English, Zemtsova (2019, p. 421) found that *cat* was the most common keyword synonymous with pets in domestic animal-referenced expressions, positing that in England "a cat symbolizes an evil, ill-fated person who likes to argue". *The cat got your tongue* expresses an instance wherein a person has no response for a given question, argument, or circumstance requiring a response within that moment. The French equivalent, *donner sa langue au chat* (to give your tongue to the cat) carries the same meaning and usage to the English idiom, with the use of *langue*, or tongue, providing enough transparency to denote a context relating to speaking, whereas *chat*, or cat, can potentially obscure this context for a learner of English or French. In isolation, the expression can take on an opaque to semi-opaque function of idiomaticity. This idiom operates as an utterance in reaction to one's silence on a matter which should otherwise

provoke a response.

Historical perceptions of cats throughout Europe and North America could provide some insight into how a cat comes to be represented in metaphorical language. In a study on contrasting views of cats in popular [Western] culture, Elizabeth (2003, pp. 624–625) explored the symbolization of cats, reflecting that human beliefs and attitudes toward certain animals as opposed to personal experience tend to determine how the animal is classified, characterized, and caricatured "with determinative effects upon the treatment of that animal in society". Historian Robert Darnton's work titled *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* gives the account of printing apprentices in 18th-century Paris who were ordered by their employer to kill local cats that were making noise and keeping the household up at night. As both a joke and an act of grievance against their employer, the overworked and undercompensated apprentices held a mock trial for the cats and then hung them, imagining the cats to be their masters. The grim event was said to be a comical attempt fifty years before the French Revolution to show defiance of the workers against the employers who treated them badly. Darnton (2009) also seems to suggest that more than any other animal, cats were used as symbols during this period in Europe and often associated with sexuality, femininity, and witchcraft.

A perceived mystical power of cats, one that appears to defy mortality, can be observed in the idiom *to have nine lives like a cat*, found in other languages including Turkish, *dokuz canlı kedi* (cat with nine lives), and Italian, *avere sett evite come I gatti* (to have seven lives like a cat). The idiom refers to an individual who is adept at getting out of bad situations with few repercussions. The expression has been traced back to Egyptian mythology where the cat was featured as one of the incarnations of Ra, the solar god credited with killing an evil serpent. In an analysis on literary cats and their portrayal as both friends and adversaries, Nikolajeva (2009, p. 249) explained that the lionization of the cat as a heroic warrior in ancient Egyptian lore has impacted representations of cats in Chinese and European folklore, with the animal receiving a "twofold status … as [both] benevolent and evil".

In addition to this twofold status as a living creature, the idiomatic representation of a dead cat may also reveal certain beliefs and attitudes toward certain animals in society, as emphasized by Elizabeth (2003). A particularly unsavory cat expression is the American aphorism *there is more than one way to skin a cat*, meaning that there are multiple ways to achieve a desired outcome. The expression hints at an implied value attributed to the skin and fur of a dead cat. In their language blog on grammar, etymology, and usage, Patricia T. O'Conner and Stewart Kellerman (2021) discuss this idiom as one of multiple hyperbolical expressions found in the Oxford English Dictionary about "skinning things" that suggests a tendency toward being parsimonious, or excessively cheap and stingy.

> In the 19th century, other versions of the "skin" phrase began appearing. A miser, seeing to get the last atom of use out of a useless thing, would "skin a louse" (1803), "skin a flea … for its hide or tallow" (1819), and finally "skin a cat". (O'Conner & Kellerman, 2021)

A cat's fur is not traditionally regarded for its value in American society, which may account for why the expression evolved to include the cat. O'Conner and Kellerman further explain that while this earlier expression does not confirm the source of the idiom, the proverbial quality of *more than one way* to do something existed before cats appeared in the expression, implying that this may have simply developed out of a conflation of the two cat expressions in English discourse.

Proverbial idioms with domestic animal references that are shared between different languages and cultures also create an opportunity for close examination. The proverbial German adage, *schlafende Hunde soll man nicht wecken* translates to the English equivalent of *let sleeping dogs lie*; though, it may be argued that the English usage can differ somewhat from German. Both the German and English usage emphasize the importance of not interfering in a situation which could result in trouble, while the English can also be understood as a warning against arousing suspicion. Regardless of this marginal difference, this expression functions as a proverb in both languages with the nexus of semantic transparency found in the noun preceded by its modifier, *schlafende Hunde/sleeping dogs*. This allows for a kind of transparency denoting an occurrence of calm and helps to reveal the context rather than obscure it.

The English version of this idiom is said to have its origins in the 13th and 14th centuries (JRS, 1967; West, 2012; North, 2017) wherein the literary meaning imparts wisdom for living one's life and governing one's household or people. Martin's (2009) UK web archive, Phrase Finder is recognized by the Library of Congress for providing origins of thousands of contemporary proverbs and idioms in English. This source reveals a human fear of dogs becoming dangerously unpredictable if suddenly disturbed. Martin's archive cites Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* [circa 1380] as the first known incident of this expression appearing in print: "It is nouht good a slepyng hound to wake." By the 16th century, it appeared as a cautionary phrase in English poet and playwright John Heywood's *A Dialogue Conteinyng the Nomber in Effect of All the Prouerbes in the Englishe Tongue* (Martin, 2009): "It is euill waking of the slepyng dog." The contemporary wording for this expression later appeared in the 1822 publication of an article entitled "The Second Tale of Allan Lorburne" about a sailor and a ship (*The London Magazine*, 1822): "Let sleeping dogs lie, said the daft man, when he saw the dead hound before him."

Martin's (2009) archive is one of numerous online sources analyzing poetry and literature for the origins of current expressions which credits this 19th century reference for the English expression in current use. Though the examples of reported speech with the "daft man" as "insane" and the "dead hound" as a stricken ship have no sensibility to English speakers using this idiom today, this publication is still regarded as the source for the contemporary idiom. The original phrase attributed to Chaucer may have been present before the 13th century (Martin, 2009), which, given that Old English emerged from the West Germanic tribes of the 5th century, may validate an investigation into the phrase's German origins that potentially predate Chaucer.

3. Semantic transparency and language acquisition

While central to transparency, the animal reference is not the only source of meaning salience for a language learner, as animal expressions are inevitably polylexemic[1] in that they possess other constituents such as other (non-animal) nouns, in addition to verbs, adjectives or modifiers, and determiners which can influence meaning. Casas and Campoy (1995) have called for an investigation of idioms through an anthropolinguistic lens to understand what is taken for granted at the intersections of language and culture. Language in this sense operates as a cultural resource, while idioms operate as a cultural practice. Many English speakers, for example, know that to *hear it straight from the horse's mouth* is to have a direct and reliable source of information. Transparency of the expression relies on the verb *hear*, indicating means, the modifier *straight*, indicating directness and validity, and the prepositional phrase *from the horse's mouth*, indicating reliability. This prepositional phrase, its own polylexemic expression, contains the most vital lexemes which are invariable in that their order is fixed and should not be changed and re-ordered (see Figure 1).

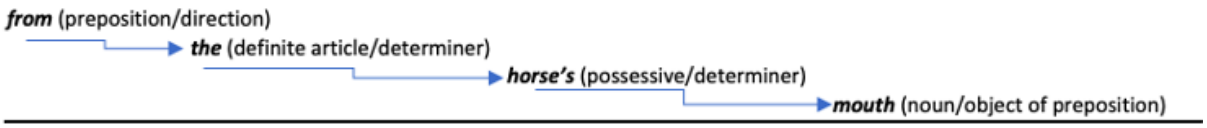

Figure 1: Lexical determiners in *from the horse's mouth*

The lexical determiners in this construction, both the definite article and the possessive together, function to aid the expression's transparency in English. Cruttenden (2011) shows how a definite article [the] can indicate a very particular object and limits its meaning to something specific. The object and its possessive determiner cannot retain its idiomatic meaning or emphasis when replaced with an indefinite [a] article. The possessive determiner is embedded with the animal reference, which is also determined by the definite article.

The horse as a source of authority bears a historical and cultural connection to English society, as horses have been routinely beloved and characterized as noble in Victorian English culture (Ritvo, 1987; Landry, 2008; Curth, 2012). Martin's (2009) Phrase Finder traces the earliest appearance of the expression to the June 1896 *Reynolds Newspaper*, a London-based publication addressing the immense popularity of horseracing[2] in Britain.

[1] Polylexemic phrases fall under the wider domain of phraseology, which attends to multi-word units of expression such as phrasal verbs, collocations, and idioms. Within this domain, classifications can emerge in multiple phraseological units, including what Fiedler (2015) identifies as "stereotyped comparisons" such as *eat like a horse* and proverbs such as *let sleeping dogs lie*, among other classifications.
[2] Horseracing for sport and profit can be traced back to the ancient Egyptians and Greeks before animal welfare regulations were conceptualized. It is important to note, however, that despite current

Huggins (2003, p. 15) reports that horseracing was one of the most significant "British industries between the wars". Betting on a winning horse could prove profitable for stakeholders. However, as with any form of gambling, it posed substantial financial risk as well, as even a consistently winning horse in its prime that was projected for success could not be guaranteed to win any given race. The horse's mouth in this idiom therefore signals that rather than coming from the inner circle of stable hands and trainers closest to the racehorse, tips on the projected winner should come from the horse itself. The horse reference does not provide the primary means of transparency, however. The multiple lexemes presented alongside the syntactic pattern, or word order, and placement of the animal reference within the idiom facilitate its meaning.

Placement within the syntactic structure is also of linguistic and rhetorical significance when examining constituents that impact transparency in animal expressions. Consider the polylexemic constructions of the two expressions as independent clauses in Figure 2.

A	***little***	***bird***	***told***	***me***.
indefinite article	modifier	animal agent	action	object
	Independent Clause			

I	***heard***	***it***	*straight*	*from*	*the*	*horse's mouth*.
human agent	action	direct object		preposition	definite article	object of preposition
Independent Clause			Prepositional Phrase			

Figure 2: Independent clauses in *A little bird told me* and *from the horse's mouth*

To be a fully independent clause, the first idiom uses the animal reference as the agent of the action, whereas the animal reference is not contained within the independent clause for the second. The determiner [a] is an indefinite article limiting an object as singular but also de-particularizing the noun [bird] as random and less authoritative. The use of *a bird* further denotes a third-party messenger relaying information from the original source to the recipient as opposed to *the horse's mouth*, which represents the direct source. English speakers use the bird expression to avoid revealing the source of their information. While both utterances could be re-ordered without losing their grammatical accuracy in English, only the first can be re-ordered without losing its idiomaticity in English.

- *I heard it from a little bird.*
- *The horse's mouth told me.*

endeavors to create animal welfare standards in horseracing across Europe and North America, the industry itself is coming under increasing scrutiny in the West for its exploitation of horses and lack of accountability for those who are responsible for causing mental and physical damage to the animals in the process of commodifying them (McLean & McGreevy, 2010; Campbell 2021; Mkono et al., 2023; Van Niekerk, 2023).

Though it is more natural to hear the bird positioned as the subject, re-ordering the idiom to position the first-person pronoun [I] and include a prepositional phrase will not obscure the meaning for an English speaker. This re-ordering is popularized in Arnold Shapiro's 1991 children's picture book *I Heard It from a Little Bird*, telling the story of how one comment from a bird becomes a significant exaggeration when retold through a succession of other animals. Whether functioning as the subject or object of the preposition, the bird assists the semantic motivation for the expression and has the strongest impact on transparency.

3.1. Cross-linguistic transparency in shared idioms

Semantic transparency of animal idioms in language acquisition can be subjective based on a variety of factors, the first and perhaps most significant being the shared lexical-grammatical features of the idiom between the speaker's dominant language and the target language. Consider, for example, three variations of the English bird expression *kill two birds with one stone*:

- **Portuguese:** *matar dois coelhos com uma cajadad só* (kill two rabbits with one stone)
- **Romanian:** *împuşca doi iepuri dintr-un foc* (shoot two rabbits in a fire)
- **Korean:** *twu-mali tokki-lul motwu capass-ta* (catch two rabbits)

English speakers can recognize the Portuguese idiom as the common expression for achieving two things at one time, despite the substitution of *coelho* (rabbit) for *bird*. This idiom, presented in isolation, has the potential to carry transparency for English-speaking learners of Portuguese. Both idioms follow the same syntactical SVO (subject-verb-object) structure with the animal reference preceded by the infinitive verb form of *matar/to kill* and proceeded by the prepositional phrase *com uma cajadad só/with one stone*. They use the same determiners, *dois/two* for the animal object and *uma/one* for the object of the preposition. The specific animal reference does not impact the salience of meaning for the English speaker, as it is the determiner which facilitates the transparency.

A Romanian speaker may find this Portuguese idiom semi-transparent. The determiner and animal reference *doi iepuri /dois coelho* combined with discursive context clues can then better frame the semantic motivation and facilitate semi-transparency for a Romanian speaker learning Portuguese and for a Portuguese speaker learning Romanian. For an English speaker learning Romanian, however, the idiom is more likely to become semi-opaque, potentially resulting in a misinterpretation of the expression as more literal, for example, to shoot rabbits in a fire as a humane act of putting them out of their misery. Romanian learners of English may likewise find *to kill two birds with one stone* semi-opaque, resulting in a possible misinterpretation, such as throwing a stone at a bird and incidentally hitting two.

The determiner in the Korean equivalent may allow for more transparency for

speakers of Portuguese and Romanian than speakers of English; however, opacity may be likely for speakers of all three languages due to the SOV (subject-object-verb) word order with the selected verb at the end — *two rabbits catch*. The use of *catch* can obscure meaning for speakers familiar with verbs *kill* and *shoot* in the idiom (note[3] that ecolinguists may justifiably find any form of this expression socially problematic). While these lexical-grammatical differences may produce opacity for Korean speakers learning Portuguese or Romanian, a factor that may facilitate transparency more is the popularity of the Confucius proverb in Korean (also traced back to a late fifteenth-century compilation of proverbs by Erasmus):

- *Ganeun tokki jab-eulyeoda jab-eun tokki nohchinda.*
  (You lose the rabbit in the hand trying to catch the one on the run.)

In South Korea, to *catch two rabbits* without losing one contradicts the proverb's intended message of aiming for only one goal at a time, thus establishing the idiom for *accomplishment* in Korea's notable achievement-driven culture (Park & Kim, 2006; Han & McPherson, 2009). When chased, rabbits do not run in a straight line and can accelerate immediate changes in direction when a pursuer is near. To catch one rabbit requires significant focus and tenacity, realistically making it impossible to catch two at once. The familiar representation of a *rabbit* for goal in Portuguese and Romanian, accompanied by the same determiner combined with a Korean cultural understanding of *two rabbits* as an extraordinary and desired achievement could reveal enough to move the Portuguese and Romanian idioms from semi-opaque to semi-transparent for a Korean speaker. Moreover, due to mandated English classes in Korean primary education, Koreans become familiar with SVO word order from an early age. The syntactical structure of Portuguese and Romanian may therefore be less likely to obscure meaning for speakers of Korean learning these languages. The English idiom, by contrast, can become more obscured with the use of *bird* in place of *rabbit* in addition to the verb *kill* in place of *catch*.

[3] It is worthwhile to consider the ease with which we repeat expressions of violence against non-human animals so casually in our discourse, even if we may not approve of such violence toward the animals being referenced. Stibbe (2001) has explained that because animals cannot have a voice in the way they are socially constructed in human language, humans may benefit from a more critical analysis of these expressions. Idioms are passed down through generations as literary devices and can be modified to use less violent language which will also convey the same meaning. These modifications also offer a teaching moment in second language acquisition by allowing learners to review the violent expression with its non-violent counterpart, potentially opening up an intercultural dialogue on animal values. For example, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) recommends *feed two birds with one scone* as opposed to *kill two birds with one stone*. Other modifications include removing the animal completely and replacing it with an inanimate object, such as *more than one way to peel a potato* as opposed to *more than one way to skin a cat*. While I do not mean to advocate for policing language, these modified or alternative expressions do provide an opportune moment to cross-culturally and cross-linguistically examine certain idioms that reflect previously unexamined attitudes toward animals that do not necessarily align with our values today.

In these instances of opacity, social and cultural perceptions of a live bird and a live rabbit also play a role. While both animals can be perceived as pets or pests in various contexts, a rabbit is often regarded in literary fiction as an endearing creature worthy of protection from predators. Rabbits are also associated across Europe with pleasant Easter holiday traditions and cute décor for children. A rabbit's "cuteness" became the subject of study on human attraction to certain facial features based on the skull morphology of the animal, wherein humans were found to prefer the "baby-like features of flat-faced rabbits" bred domestically to be pets (Harvey et al., 2019, p. 1). This selection of traits in certain animals (Serpell, 2003) can also prompt humans to elevate the animal to modes of symbolism depicted favorably in metaphors (Borgi & Cirulli, 2016). Irrespective of language, the individualized experience of intimacy and interaction with an animal based on a speaker's cultural norms may guide the speaker's attitude toward the animal, thereby impacting their interpretation of the animal's role in idiomaticity.

3.2. The role of cultural exposure in transparency

Cultural exposure to a new or target language plays another role in the semantic transparency of animal expressions. This is especially true for learners of a languages that do not share similar grammatical structures, writing systems, or cognates[4] with learners' first or dominant language. Inevitably, this would impact European learners who are motivated to study Japanese, perhaps due to the popularity of anime, or Korean, which has risen in popularity due in part to an increased global interest in South Korean pop culture (Marinescu, 2015). To understand animal placement in the figurative expressions in either language, an authentic exposure to the cultural discourses in Japan and South Korea can provide beneficial insight into an idiom's level of transparency.

A popular Korean expression using dog (개 "gae") and cow (소 "soh") expresses devaluation of an individual who has achieved success and notoriety:

- Yo-seh *gae-na soh-na* dah idol-e-yah. (These days, any dog or cow is a K-pop idol.)

While the isolated expression may carry transparency to a learner of Korean, understanding the cultural context of K-pop (Korean pop culture) celebrities likened to two animals regarded as food products in society is imperative for using the idiom in Korean discourse. Until recently, dogs of certain breeds in South Korea were raised for food, a tradition that has grown increasingly more polarizing in Korean society between generations (Czajkowski, 2014). Under mounting pressure and concerns over animal welfare, recent legislation has banned the breeding and slaughter of dogs for meat and required the dog meat industry to stop operations in the country by 2027. This signals a shift in South

[4] Cognates are words in two or more languages which share lexical roots and can ease translation from one language to another. An example of an animal cognate is *le lion* in French, *der Löwe* in German, *o leão* in Portuguese, and *lejonet* in Swedish, all of which come from the Latin root *leo* for *lion*.

Korean societal views on dogs as protected animals which are still characterized as livestock (Choi et al., 2024). The idiom, however, characterizes a dog as an unexceptional creature that does not rise to the level of notoriety any more than a cow would. The dog and the cow therefore assist semantic motivation, as *gae-na soh-na* is used to express *anyone and everyone* and can be applied to other contexts outside of K-pop fandom.

The role of exposure in Japanese and Korean can become particularly salient in acquisition of isolating languages due to classifiers. In Japanese, Sudo (2018) points out that animal nouns require multiple obligatory classifiers with selected semantic restrictions based on the animal type, taxonomy, and size, syntactically ordered as *animal noun* + *numeral* + *classifier* seen in Table 2:

Table 2: Adapted from *Advanced Semantic Theory – Classifier Languages* by Y. Sudo (2018, pp. 1–2)

Classifier	**Semantic Restriction**	**Use**
-wa	birds and rabbits	*niwatori ichi-wa* "chicken one"
-hiki	small non-bird animals	*neko san-hiki* "cat three"
-too	large non-bird animals	*kuzira go-too* "whale five"

Some animal nouns accommodate multiple classifiers in the same phrase while numerous additional classifiers exist for inanimate nouns that also function as vital lexemes in Japanese idioms. Furthermore, because numerals and determiners also communicate significant lexical content needed for animal idioms in Japanese, learners from non-classifier language backgrounds such as English, German, and other Indo-European backgrounds will need to achieve a certain proficiency of the classifier modulations in Japanese. To predict the meaning of an animal idiom and reproduce it in natural discourse of a target language, learners also need to understand how classifiers impact the morphology of different nouns, including animal nouns.

Returning to Korean, the degree of transparency also relies on a learner's schema (background knowledge) of the noun or nouns presented in animal idioms. For example, the expression *umul an gaegulineun badaleul moleunda*, which translates to *the frog in the well knows nothing of the ocean*, is comparable to a similar English expression of *a big fish in a small pond*. The latter refers to a person who has significant influence only within a small sphere. English speakers examining the Korean expression may infer the frog to represent a simple and sheltered individual living in a small town who knows nothing of the city, or an ignorant individual who knows nothing of the wider world beyond their immediate sphere. Both inferences are close to the Korean interpretation while neither correctly instantiates the semantic motivation, that is, the relationship between the expression's form and its meaning. The semi-opaqueness leaves the idiom open to different interpretations despite the learner's level of mastery in Korean lexis, syntax, and morphology. In English, the

adjectives *big* and *small* modify the nouns to facilitate transparency. In Korean, no such modifiers are present. Moreover, it is not the animal noun that frames the semantic motivation but the environment in which the animal can and cannot reside.

The relationship between the two nouns, *gaeguli* (frog) and *bada* (sea), is critical to the idiom's transparency. As a frog cannot survive in saltwater and therefore can never live in the ocean, the selection of the animal noun can obscure the intended meaning of the Korean idiom for an English speaker equating it to *a big fish in a small pond*. To move from semi-opaque to semi-transparent, schematic understanding of what this semantic relationship between *gaeguli* and *bada* represents is required to understand that Korean usage of this idiom can differ slightly from the usage of its English counterpart. The expression rather indicates someone who lacks significant knowledge, skill, or influence but still insists on boasting. This incidentally connotes a more negative interpretation than the English expression, which can have both negative and positive interpretations.

Unlike the Korean expression, the Japanese equivalent *saruyama no bosu*, which translates to *boss of the monkey mountain*, does rely on the animal noun to frame the semantic motivation, that is, the reason for using *monkey* in the expression. This idiom also negatively refers to an arrogant individual consumed with their status in a small, unimpressive circle; however, the selection of nouns is socially and culturally intuitive to Japanese speakers living in Japan. In examining cultural perspectives on human–animal intimacies, Knight (2005) explains that all Japanese are familiar with *saruyama*, or monkey mountain, due to the wide exposure of monkey parks in the Japanese media. To experience the relevance of the monkey parks in Japan is to build a schema that facilitates the level of transparency embedded within the expression. More importantly, the relationship between speakers is critical to the discursive usage in such Japanese expressions. Siegal (1996) emphasizes that it is very difficult to form a sentence in Japanese discourse unless the speaker comments also on whatever relationship exists with their interlocutor, requiring that a learner achieve sociolinguistic proficiency by understanding the individual and societal factors embedded in the Japanese language. For learners of Korean and Japanese, these cultural and relational elements are imperative to acquisition and usage of these languages and their respective idiomatic expressions. Like any other language, exposure to discourse in a language's natural environment is critical to understanding the figurative elements of the language and reproducing them naturally in culturally and socially appropriate contexts. Language proficiency alone cannot aid in a learner's processing and production of idiomaticity in a target language.

4. Discursive relativity and interpretation

Debates exist among linguists, philosophers, and psychologists over the degree to which language can influence a user's thoughts and experience of the natural world. That a speaker's dominant language could impact their perception of animals in figurative language and impact the semantic transparency of an entire animal expression follows

along the domain of linguistic relativity, also referenced as the "relativity hypothesis" and "linguistic determinism". Relativists argue that speakers of different languages will invariably experience the world differently due to innate language diversity (Thierry, 2016), which can impact the process of encoding thoughts into words and words into phrases of meaning (Slobin, 1996), and in turn, bring about a discovery of concepts not yet familiar to the speaker (von Humboldt, 1988). From this, it has often been inferred, though not explicitly stated in the literature, that learning a new language can alter one's thoughts enough to change their perception of the world around them. Opponents of this view (Pullam, 1991; Pinker, 1994; Bloom & Keil, 2001; McWhorter, 2014) do not deny a relationship between language and thought but cast substantial doubt on the degree to which language can impact cognition and perception.

In examining idiomaticity that relies on animal symbolism alongside the cultural specificity embedded within the symbolism, it is useful to consider relationships between language and cognition as multifaceted and symbiotic. Lucy (1997) offers three levels of potential influence that language may have on cognition, several of which may hold implications for how animal idioms are understood and operationalized in different languages and in language acquisition. The semiotic level is concerned with whether a code in natural human language with a symbolic component can significantly impact thinking as opposed to a language code relying only on indexicality (contextualization). If such a code in human language can transform thinking, this suggests "a semiotic relativity of thought with respect to other [non-human] species lacking such a code" (Lucy, 1997, p. 292). What is meant by *code*, however, is not explicitly articulated in Lucy's explanation of this level. The structural level is concerned with how varied morphosyntactic constructions (e.g., articles, determiners, classifiers, verb inflections) may influence thought and perception. The third level identified by Lucy (1997), known as the functional level, refers more to type of relativity wherein a speaker's discursive practice modulates the structure of a language or directly impacts how a speaker interprets discourse in interaction. This type of impact may be better understood as discursive relativity.

4.1. Animal symbols in Chinese characters

Chinese animal expressions demonstrate a curious example of discursive relativity by way of their history in ancient calligraphic symbolism and subsequent natural occurrence in the contemporary Chinese language. First, animal expressions are used more commonly in written discourse in Chinese, whereas in English, they appear more frequently in spoken discourse. Second, familiarity with animal symbolism in traditional Chinese written characters known as *Hanzi* — symbols reflecting the cultural evolution from the early Shāng Dynasty to the final Qing Dynasty (Jerebtsov & Pivtorak, 2012; Chen et al., 2020) — is critical to understanding animal expressions and how they are useful in Chinese discourse. Third, these required symbols, unlike the alphabets of European languages, are rich in metaphor and metonymy on their own, influenced by both conceptual and

pragmatic meaning in the strokes of their characters. These characters have created a proliferation of symbolism for all elements of nature which cannot be understated in their significance to the acquisition of the Chinese language.

Linguistically, the modern Chinese alphabet is a corpus of such characters with meaning encoded in logograms which can represent either a single morpheme or an entire phrase. Lexically, the semantic portion in phrases known as the *radical* becomes encoded in the strokes from left to right or top to bottom. Elephant, or *xiàng* (象), is written from top to bottom and can symbolize strength, wisdom, prosperity, luck, or obedience. Ying et al. (2016) offer these figurative representations in varied idiomatic phrases:

- Bāoluówàng **xiàng** — wealthy with unlimited means and access to resources
- Bā xī zhuó **xiàng** — promotion of talent in a person or group
- Màng rèn mō **xiàng** — lack of experience or wisdom needed to draw conclusions

Wealth, talent, and wisdom share a common lexical proposition not explicitly written in the expressions but conceptually embedded into their use of *xiàng* to illustrate *dà* (大), or *large*. This modifier appears in the characters depicting words for *vas*t, *great*, and *immense* (广大), as well as *elephant* (大象). The third expression is a discursive idiom translating to a *blind man touches an elephant*, an opaque expression with significant symbolism in discourse. To fully understand and utilize *xiàng* with meaningful, figurative accuracy, a learner of Chinese will need to understand the animal's relationship to vastness and greatness as depicted in logograms. Japanese and Korean discourse, also impacted by Chinese logograms, reveals how a semantic understanding of animal idioms in these languages relies on an understanding of both conceptual and pragmatic meanings.

It may be further argued that in addition to the functional discursive level, languages incorporating logograms for animal idioms can demonstrate Lucy's (1996) semiotic level of influence on perception. While this does not validate the explanation that dichotomizes human and non-human language users as different species with the former possessing a code that the latter does not, it does suggest a type of language code found in some human languages and not in others. Users of non-logogram languages cannot access the encoded conceptual and pragmatic meanings in idioms until they have learned to functionally interact in the written discourse of the logogram language. This appears to create a bilateral relationship between the semiotic and functional levels of impact that language can have on thought and perception. Logograms, as well as obligatory classification, such as that found in Japanese, could also be argued to reveal a structural level of the relativity hypothesis predicated on the belief that specific embedded [morphosyntactic, phonological and pragmatic] patterns also have meaningful implications for thought. This could be of a particular relevance to the semantic restrictions of different classifiers for different types of nouns, and, in the case of Japanese, the specific restrictions within the classifier system for different animal nouns.

4.2. Discursive over linguistic relativity

In exploring figurative language within the larger debate over whether language can significantly impact thought, the structural features of a language (e.g., syntax, morphology, lexical-grammatical patterns) and a learner's ability to master these features are unlikely to impact perceptions of animals in idioms to any significant degree. Rather, interpretation which materializes in the functional level of discourse for a user or learner would have the most salient impact on how a learner encounters animal idioms in a target language. This is consistent with Lucy's (1997) explanation of language interpretation as a necessity for guiding cognitive activity. The social, cultural, and structural schemas embedded within a language will guide the interpretation, while perception shaped by social and cultural factors impacting one's dominant language impact the way they predict meaning in animal expressions of a target language. This suggests that discursive relativity rather than linguistic relativity better encapsulates the relationship of language to a speaker's perceptions of, beliefs about, or experiences with animals in both literal and figurative language as well as in the natural environment.

Examining ways in which animals are used in idiomatic formulations of different languages can reveal a universal need for humans to demystify the natural world in ways that make it more relatable. This examination reveals how we attempt to demystify complex linguistic and discursive features of human language by ascribing figurative identities to animals and other non-human species in an effort to make abstract concepts appear more concrete. Anthropolinguistic and ecolinguistic approaches to discourse analysis in idiomaticity can be justified by multiple domains within relevant literature (Crystal, 1985; Casas & Campoy, 1995; Stibbe, 2001). Interpretative methods in discourse analysis offer possibilities for multiple sublinguistic disciplines to investigate non-literal language.

Missing in most literature on idiomaticity, however, is an attentive examination of rhetoricity, referenced earlier in this paper with symbolism and synecdoche. Idiomatic language is innately rhetorical in that it is difficult to challenge due to shared cultural knowledge instantiated in idiomatic formulations among members of a discourse community (Drew & Holt, 1988; Kitzinger, 2000). This has been demonstrated by Johnson and Lakoff (2002) in the way that social and political discourses become structured by idiomatic language [conceptual or conventional metaphors] which includes animals, as well as Stibbe's (2001) concern that language can exploit animals and corrode our human relationship with nature. From these general observations in human discourse to the specific call from Jacobs (2006) to address human language bias against animals in the teaching of English, rhetoricity in human language remains a largely unmentioned and unexamined discursive phenomenon in the study of idiomaticity. Rhetoricity of idiomatic language, particularly with respect to its origin within a culture and language, can be rigorously examined through rhetorical analyses (Meynet, 1998; Leach, 2000; Selzer, 2003; Zachry, 2009). In doing so, linguistic scholars can critically attend to idiomatic expressions' intended and unintended impact on audiences and discourse participants, as well as on

human behavior in diverse socio-cultural and ecological environments.

When examining how animals in non-literal language are utilized in varied expressions across languages and cultures, I would offer that Billig and MacMillan's (2005, p. 463) emphasis on "the history of language use rather than a process psychology of habituation" can illuminate the ways in which rhetoricity and idiomaticity operate in tandem. From this, I argue that cross-linguistic studies on idiomaticity using popular methods such as corpus analysis and experimental data collected from human participants of varied language groups can be better analyzed when anthropolinguistic, eco-sociolinguistic, and rhetorical frameworks are applied. This informs how humans both learn language *from* and teach language *to* one another across cultures and demographics.

Finally, within a wider scope of human discourse, exploring the ways in which we conceptualize, metaphorize, and metonymize animals in our figurative language provides an important opportunity to evaluate our own unexamined attitudes toward our non-human counterparts. With global calls to prioritize animal welfare continuing to grow, this language becomes a relevant point of scrutiny in discourses surrounding the diversity of human values that characterize non-human animals in domestic and natural environments. This diversity of values is rightfully emphasized in Narges Kalantari's (2023) summary of Sinclair et al.'s (2022) study on how animals are perceived in different cultures:

> Our perceptions of animals greatly influence how we treat them. Different cultures have different perspectives on various animals, and because of that, building a global advocacy movement requires understanding how different cultures' views vary. (Kalantari, 2023, para. 1)

At the end of the summary, Kalantari calls on animal welfare advocates to use cultural competence and sensitivity when considering how different societies perceive different animal species and enact those perceptions in their cultural values. In this paper, I have endeavored to contribute to this aim by combining cross-linguistic, anthropolinguistic, and eco-sociolinguistic examinations of animals in the idiomatic expressions that permeate our human language.

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