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# Curs, crabs, and cranky cows: Ethological and linguistic aspects of animal-based insults

**Abstract:** Our attitude towards animals is highly inconsistent. Linguistic evidence of this is the many animal names that we use for characterizing other humans. Although terms like “beastly” draw a clear dividing line between mankind and the animal kingdom, we also see numerous similarities across species and coin expressions such as “eagle eyes” or “ostrich policy.” A treasure trove for such comparisons can be found in animal-based insults with which we mock the appearance or behavior of others. Based on English and German examples, this contribution intends to give some ethological reasons for the fact that we choose specific animals for insulting humans. As this topic has not yet been widely explored, the result can only be a general overview, combining ethological and linguistic aspects. There are many expressions preferably used in “joshing,” but the never-ending creation of new expressions is proof of human creativity.

**Keywords:** insults; maledictology; cultural stereotypes of animals; linguistic creativity; humor

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To insult someone we call him “bestial.” For deliberate cruelty and nature, “human” might be the greater insult.

– Isaac Asimov

## 1 Introduction

The attitude of humans towards animals is complex and highly contradictory. We showcase individual animals like the famous polar bear Knut as media stars and treat many pets as family members, whereas billions of domestic animals live in substandard conditions and the habitat of wild animals constantly shrinks due to human influences.

The same contradictions show up in animal representations; for example, films, and not only animated films, humanize animals. In the French documentary film *March of the Penguins* (Jacquet 2005)<sup>1</sup>, for example, the penguins talk themselves, describing their feelings and the difficulties they meet on their long journey from the breeding grounds to the open sea where they feed. On the other hand, many thrillers either demonize dangerous animals, such as sharks in *Jaws* (Spielberg 1975)<sup>2</sup>, or they show normally harmless animals turned into beasts, such as giant mutated ants in *Them!* (Douglas 1954).<sup>3</sup>

A second example is animal-based characterization of people. Expressions may be affectionate, such as “bunny”; neutral, such as “lone wolf”; or negative, such as “hog.” This contribution concentrates on only one group of expressions, namely, animal-based terms of abuse. By integrating the perspectives of ethology, psychology, and linguistics, it attempts to provide reasons why we tend to use animal names for insulting other humans.

As an introduction to the topic, section 2 characterizes the interdisciplinary field of maledictology, the science of bad words, and defines the subarea of insults. Although insulting is rooted in pre-human aggressive behavior, only humans have elaborated and developed inarticulate utterances of anger into our surprisingly creative diversity of insults and other forms of verbal abuse. Section 3 sketches our ecological and symbolic relations to animals. The important role of animals in history motivated a wide variety of texts and depictions, ranging from worshipping animals to demonizing them. The next sections show our tendency to creatively express inter-species similarities in elaborated phrases. We coin descriptive expressions, such as “eagle eyes,” as well as insults, like “ass” or “whale.” The latter may be gender-neutral (section 4) or gender-specific (section 5). Not included are the names of fictional animals, although “Garfield” or “Miss Piggy” may also be used for insulting. Section 6 compares animal-based insults in English and German, investigating whether the two languages correlate the criticized human shortcoming to the same animals or only to the same animal features. The conclusion offers a summary of key points.

As a native speaker of German, my corpus of insulting terms started with German examples. Most of them are taken from oral dialogues in which I was either a participant or bystander, and sources are added only in the case of highly unusual examples. As the insult-vocabularies of both languages are largely overlapping but not identical, Reinhold Aman (cf. section 2) contributed most of the

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<sup>1</sup> Jacquet, Luc. 2005. *March of the Penguins* (La Marche de l'Empereur). Bonne Pioche and APC.

<sup>2</sup> Spielberg, Steven. 1975. *Jaws*. Universal Pictures.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas, Gordon. 1954. *Them!* Warner Brothers.

English counterparts and alternatives. If necessary, I add German expressions in brackets. A personal remark seems to be appropriate here: before studying linguistics, I drove a fork-lifter for two years as the only woman among male colleagues. Thus, I perfectly know the semantics and pragmatics of a type of joshing that is regarded as extremely plebian in academic circles. But my opinion of such speech is exactly the opposite: inventing and modifying rude comments in order to stay alive during hard work should be seen as clear proof of the human capacity for creativity and humor.

## 2 Maledictology and its relations to cognitive linguistics

For a long time, aggressive language has been regarded merely as slang and therefore excluded from serious analysis. Grice's conversational maxims, for example, concentrate on cooperative situations in which all utterances are considered to be informative. Categories of such utterances include stating true facts, promising, and warning (Grice 1975). But in more informal situations, people produce many less serious speech acts, like telling jokes and teasing.

In order to investigate this neglected type of utterance, the philologist Reinhold Aman founded the interdisciplinary field "maledictology" (from the Latin "maledicere" – to swear, to curse, to use "bad" words) in the seventies. Since 1977 he has published the rapidly growing studies in his journal *Maledicta*. Maledictology is located at the intersection of psychology and linguistics and sheds light on the structures and functions of all negatively valued words and phrases. It examines their origins, facets, and development, as well as interlingual and intercultural differences.

This article concentrates on insults and tries to give some answers to the question of why we like to use animal-based insults and why we choose specific animals for this purpose. It has been strongly inspired by Jay's (2000) monograph *Why We Curse*, which draws together findings from various disciplines ranging from linguistics to neurology. Recently, Havryliv (2009) published a synopsis of swearing based on an extensive corpus of Viennese expressions.

Ethologically speaking, insulting is part of intra-species aggressive behavior. Animals use aggressive acts to establish a dominance hierarchy, defend territory, and get access to resources (food, water, shelter, mating partners). Rivalry and fights among males are frequent but rarely cause serious injuries. Aggressive behavior includes physical acts (beating, biting, pecking, etc.) as well as signals

in all sensory channels, namely, vocal calls (growling, hissing, etc.), visual threat displays (baring one's teeth, inflating one's chest, ruffling feathers, etc.), and olfactory signals (scent marks).

Similar signs of aggression are found in human behavior as well, but as “talking animals” we have also invented something new: we have evolved inarticulate aggressive displays into a specialized area of language, namely, the wide field of verbal aggressions. Important subareas are:

- swearing (using rude, vulgar, or taboo language in general);
- cursing (entreating supernatural powers to inflict misfortune, illness, or death on the adversary);
- threatening (vowing bodily injuries, death, legal actions, or other punishment);
- aggressive requesting (e.g., “Get lost!” or “Drop dead!”);
- insulting (stating negative or embarrassing traits of the addressee).

The main intention of swearing in general is to work off the negative emotions of the speaker. In the more special case of insulting, the speaker expresses his or her low opinion of the target. Seen from the speaker's perspective, this may be done in reaction, i.e., caused by a rude action of the addressee, or fully intentionally. Insulting in public is much more embarrassing because the target is disgraced in the presence of an audience that may be huge due to mass media. In joshing, however (see below), the speaker may voluntarily stage himself or herself as a humorous entertainer (cf. section 6.1).

Insulting others may be caused by feelings of frustration, anger, hatred, jealousy, envy, and the like. The famous case study “Anger” by George Lakoff (1987: 380) demonstrates that we systematically describe verbal or physical tantrums in physical terms. Like heat in a closed container, anger rises inside a person until he or she “gets red in the face” and finally “bursts with anger,” resulting in actions from smashing dishes to homicide.

Depending on the social context, insulting is considered to be everyday behavior, witty verbal jousting, and/or an offensive trait of primitive minds. But compared with, for example, instantly slapping one's opponent, it is surely a sign of cultural progress, namely, “just words.” On the other hand, insults are “ejected,” and thus resemble the aggressive spitting or urinating of animals. The effects of insults are hardly predictable; they may either substitute or trigger physical aggression.

Insults are produced in different settings. If someone snatches away the last available parking spot, we can either mumble “dumb ass” inside our car (covered form), or yell it out of the window (open form). Insulting absent persons, for example our boss who refused a salary increase, is harmless when chatting with

a friend, but can be disastrous in the presence of bystanders. A widespread language game among friends or colleagues can be joshing as a special way of establishing group cohesion (cf. section 5). In such informal situations, even relatively rude expressions are framed as “only fun.” The addressee is expected to pay back in kind because only spoilsports react sullenly (cf. Schwanitz 2001: 137). Highly ritualized forms of joshing, mostly staged as a duel between two men, are known in many regions of the world, e.g., “Gstanzln” (harmless or aggressive freestyle verses) in Bavaria and Austria, as well as “playing the dozens” among African Americans. These may begin as harmless games, but often result in physical aggression.

Countless books, websites, articles, and products dedicated to joshing are a testament to how much people appreciate this playful type of swearing. One example is the artificial “Insult Parrot”<sup>4</sup>, equipped with a motion detector, that caws rude comments like “Polly wants a blow job” every time someone walks by. Polly is extolled as a “perfect prank gift” but the gift-giver should make sure that the receiver is sufficiently simple-minded, as the advertisement promises “With eight (!) funny insults, you will be entertained all day long!”

Not reported on here are the legal consequences of insults, but the monetary penalty for uttering “stupid pig,” for example, may be higher than the cost of, again for example, an entire pig. Excluded here too is the diachronic view of swearwords and insults. In some cases, the everyday name of an animal is replaced by a new, neutral word as soon as it acquires an indecent meaning. Williams cites two examples, namely, the transition from “ass” to “donkey” (Williams 2011: 28), and from “cock” to “rooster” (Williams 2011: 57).

### 3 Ecological and symbolic relations to animals

Animals have always played an important role in human culture, in live practice as well as in symbolic areas from religion to swearing.

#### 3.1 Ecological relations to animals

The development of human civilization would have been impossible without domesticated animals. For centuries they have been providing high-calorie foods

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4 Talking Parrot. <http://www.talking-parrot.net/insult-parrot.htm> (accessed 13 July 2013).

and raw materials, and in early history, animal power was indispensable in many areas, from trade and transport to warfare. Depending on the natural fauna and climate of an area, suitable species such as horses, camels, and yaks were domesticated and used for riding, plowing, carrying loads, and driving mills. Dogs helped with hunting and cats kept granaries vermin-free. Today, dogs and cats have become favorite pets and horses leisure-time companions. New animal roles include dolphins as therapy assistants, rodents as pharmaceutical test subjects, and pigs as donors of heart valves.

Presumably, the first domestication had several motives and techniques. Speculations on why and how it began include loose symbiotic relationships between wolf packs and humans as well as the imprinting of orphaned young animals on humans. Animal domestication in a strict sense started around 10,000 B.C. in the Neolithic period, as soon as groups of humans settled and invented agriculture. Diamond (1999: ch. 9) sums up six features that make a species suitable for domestication: the ideal livestock recognizes humans as alpha animals, accepts a variety of food, grows fast, breeds in captivity, has no aggressive disposition, and no tendency to panic-struck flight. Watson (2005: 123) states that pigs “were ready-made for cohabitation” because they accept human company, may live from all kinds of food, including scraps, and don’t need to be herded. For millennia, they were “kept under semi-wild conditions, more or less free to forage, responsive only to a call at feeding time” (Watson 2005: 132).

By selective breeding, humans “designed” animals with special features. For example, cows have been split up into dairy breeds and meat breeds. Bennecke (1994) traces the history of most domestic species, whereas Henninger-Voss (2002) investigates how the treatment of animals mirrors the features of societies.

### 3.2 Symbolic relations to animals

Humans automatically evaluate animal appearance and behavior by anthropocentric criteria. Pets and working animals are valued very positively, e.g., dogs are faithful and horses industrious. Dangerous animals such as wolves and snakes, however, are still seen as natural enemies even though we rarely encounter them in urban regions. Our own behavior mirrors this duality. On the one hand, we treat pets as family members, sharing food and sometimes sleeping space with them. On the other hand, we treat many other animals as objects, mainly through animal testing, painful breeding, animal cruelty, and sexual abuse. Animals may be gods or demons, beloved or hated mirror images of ourselves, fellow creatures,

or something completely different. Further traditional classifications are, for example, sacred versus profane, tame versus wild, edible versus inedible, and native versus alien.

Many factors influence the reputation of a specific animal species among humans (cf. Schmauks 2009). Focusing on morphological similarity, the two arms and two legs of apes are much closer to our own body structures than the wings of a bat or the eight arms of an octopus. Especially important is the existence of a face with two eyes in the front of the head. Whereas the gaze behavior and eyes of apes, dogs, and cats highly resemble our own, others seem “strange” to us, for example the horizontal pupils of goats, the gaze of most birds (watching us with only one eye), the stare of snakes, and the eight tiny eyes of spiders. A further aspect is the (perceived) pleasant or repulsive texture of skin, varying from the pleasing soft fur of many animals to the sliminess of snails, warts of toads, scales of fish, and hard shells of turtles.

Consequently, we emphasize either the differences or similarities between us. For some thinkers, the gap between mankind and the animal realm is unbridgeable. In *De Anima* (On the Soul), Aristotle distinguished psychic faculties such as nutrition, perception, and mind. He assumed that only humans possess the highest level, namely, the capacity for reason (Aristotle 1995: II3, 414a29-b6). Christian theologians claim that mankind is the crown of creation. Consequently, all other species are located “lower” in the hierarchy of life because they lack man’s distinctive features such as an immortal soul, intellect, language, or morals. In the Middle Ages, even the devil was depicted with features taken from despised animals, namely, horns, cloven hooves, bat wings, shaggy fur, fangs, and the smell of a buck in rut.

In the last several decades, the gap between man and animal has become smaller. Ethological research has shown that animals have feelings and cognitive faculties. The so-called “mirror test” that proves a basic level of self-awareness has been passed by great apes, some sea mammals (dolphins, orcas), elephants, and magpies, whereas others (including humans up to eighteen months) fail.

Contrary to these findings, some people still consider animals as “the other” in the strictest sense. One linguistic piece of evidence is the etymological relationship between the words “human” (i.e., belonging to the human race) and “humane” (having all the positive features a person should have). Within the worldview that the two terms directly correlate, calling someone “non-human” is the strongest possible reproach. According to Jay, “The magical thinking behind insulting with animal names . . . was tantamount to reducing the victim to the animal itself” (Jay 2000: 196).

Consequently, terms like “bestly,” “bestial,” and “animal” are used for characterizing the most serious criminals, positioning the offender outside of

mankind, or, in a hierarchy of dignity, below mankind. Fritz Haarmann, a serial killer from Weimar, Germany, was characterized in newspapers as a “beast,” “bloodsucker,” and “flesh-eater” (cf. Tatar 1995: 50). Some contemporaries even demanded that such criminals be “exterminated” like vermin. Many authors compare criminal offenders either to devils that torture humans or to vampires, werewolves, and other mythical monsters that feed on humans (see below). In the United States, sexual offenders are explicitly called “sexual predators” and may be indefinitely confined according to the “sexually violent predator laws.”

But apart from this criminological discourse, we also talk about “the beast in us.” The term denotes the dark parts of our souls, most of the time calm and hidden, but sometimes violently breaking out. The Roman writer Plautus coined the phrase “*homo homini lupus est*” (“Man is man’s wolf”), ignoring the fact that wolves avoid serious injury in intra-species fighting. Especially in wolves and other well-armed social carnivores, the inferior’s ritualized submissive behavior inhibits with certainty the aggression of the superior, thereby preventing energy-consuming fights.

In Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of personality (Freud 1923), the “beast in us” would be identical with the “id” that plays an ambivalent role. The “id,” although the “lowest” part of the personality, containing primitive instincts and driven by the pleasure principle, is at the same time the source of all psychic energy, the impetus to the “higher” parts of the self.

From an ethological perspective, a strict demarcation between man and animal cannot be maintained. Many behaviors considered as “humane” are deeply rooted in phylogeny, e.g., parental care, pair bonding, friendship with non-relatives, and even adoption of orphans. Conversely, other behaviors called “beastly” are unknown in animals, especially cruelty without objective purposes. Even in the case of identical behavior, the motivations are highly different. It is therefore inappropriate to accuse other species of human offenses and sins such as infanticide, fratricide, bigamy, incest, rape, or cannibalism.

On the other hand, when observing animals, we spontaneously see similarities across species. For early hunters and farmers, helpful and harmful animals played vital roles that are reflected in myths and folktales. In some cultures animals were venerated as gods, as incarnations of gods, or as ancestors of men. Some animals may have created the world or regularly guide humans, whereas others deceive or kill them.

All cultures describe mythical mixtures of man and animal such as the centaur (man + horse) and the mermaid (woman + fish). The Minotaur (body of a man + head of a bull) came into being when the Cretan queen Pasiphaë fell in love with an enchanting bull. With the help of the witty inventor Daedalus, who constructed a wooden cow, she succeeded in seducing the bull. One of the oldest



known sculptures (about 30,000 B.C.) is the “lion-headed figurine” from Southern Germany, showing a human body with the head of a lion.

Real mixtures between species are rare and have different causes. Hybrids are the offspring of two different species, such as the “liger” (male lion + tigress). They occur only in zoos because their parents would never meet and mate in the wild. “Genetic chimeras” also do not occur naturally but have been successfully created by genetic engineering. One example is the “geep” (goat + sheep), which possesses cells from both genera and a skin with woolly and hairy parts. Human-animal chimeras such as people with gills or wings are still science fiction, but more and more people live with transplanted animal organs, e.g., porcine heart valves.

Another common topic in narratives is the transformation of men into animals or vice versa (the technical term is “therianthropy”). Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (1992) are a collection of legends about humans whom the gods transformed into plants or animals – either as punishment or to rescue them from persecution. In Japanese folklore we meet beautiful girls who are foxes in disguise, and in the fairy tale *The Frog King* a prince has been bewitched and changed into a frog, only to regain his true form after being kissed by a princess. Vampires and werewolves embody the eerie side of such transformations. In today’s animal role-play, at least one participant consensually or nonconsensually takes over the role of a specific animal by imitating its behavior, e.g., by producing animal sounds, eating pet food, wearing a dog collar, or sleeping on the floor. The settings are manifold and may include costuming, sexual acts, training, or aggressive humiliation.

Fables intend to transmit a moral lesson by ascribing stereotypical features to animals, e.g., the bee is industrious, the fox is cunning, and the lion majestic. Some of these attributions and/or the situations the animals find themselves in are far from the reality. In Aesop’s fable *The ant and the grasshopper*<sup>5</sup>, for example, the grasshopper neglects to store food and therefore starves in winter, whereas real grasshoppers survive this season as eggs or in hibernation. Other poetic assignments are surprisingly true. In another Aesop’s fable *The crow and the pitcher*<sup>6</sup>, a thirsty crow cannot reach the water in a pitcher so he drops pebbles into it until the water rises high enough for him to drink. This technique has been recently observed in rooks trying to reach a floating worm.<sup>7</sup> Similarities to

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5 Aesop: *The ant and the grasshopper*. <http://www.bartleby.com/17/1/36.html> (accessed 13 July 2013).

6 Aesop: *The crow and the pitcher*. <http://www.bartleby.com/17/1/55.html> (accessed 13 July 2013).

7 Bloch, Sarah. Video: Aesop’s fable – or fact? Meet the world’s cleverest bird. *Times Online*, August 7, 2009. <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/science/biology/article1967420.ece> (accessed 13 July 2013).

animals are even seen in human sexual behavior. Due to the look of the posture one must assume, the *Kamasutra* describes many sexual positions in animal terms, such as dog, cat, or swan.

Since the Stone Age, humans have created artificial animals to be used as oblations, toys, and for many other purposes (Schmauks 2000). The latest example is zoomorphic robots as a third design paradigm beside anthropomorphic and machine-like robots. Because cuddly baby animals easily trigger emotional responses, corresponding robots are also used in hospitals and old people's homes. One famous example is the Japanese therapeutic robot Paro that simulates the movements, voice, and tactile features of a baby seal. Interaction with Paro is intended to reduce stress, to augment vocal behavior, and to improve contact with caregivers and other patients.<sup>8</sup>

Much of our knowledge about animals is not grounded in our own experience but in depictions in art or media. For example, in the sixteenth century, most people saw their first rhinoceros in the form of Dürer's famous woodcut that is only partly naturalistic. Today, city dwellers rarely have real contact with cows and pigs, but they can watch the most exotic species in movies or on TV. Sometimes zoological facts become muddled with such animal depictions. For example, some children believe that cows are lilac because they only know the Milka Cow, the famous mascot of Milka chocolate.

One linguistic topic not investigated here are the colloquial names of animals. Some of them are merely descriptive, informing about appearance or behavior such as "blackbird," "spotted owl," or "anteater." Other names include an anthropocentric judgment; for example "jellyfish" has the negative connotation of "slimy," and "sloth" denotes both a peaceful leaf-eating mammal as well as one of the Seven Vices.

As already sketched out in the introduction, the perceived similarities between humans and animals are captured in numerous elaborated phrases and sayings that will be investigated in the next sections.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Paro Therapeutic Robot. <http://www.parorobots.com> (accessed 13 July 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Many websites collect insulting terms. Some representative examples are: How Swearing Works (<http://people.howstuffworks.com/swearing.htm>); Stereotypes of animals ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stereotypes\\_of\\_animals](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stereotypes_of_animals)); The Dog House: Animal Idioms and Expression A-Z (<http://www.doghouse.com/idioms.asp>); The Ultimate Guide to Animal Insults (<http://www.wordnik.com/lists/the-ultimate-guide-to-animal-insults>); Urban Dictionary (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/>) (all accessed 13 July 2013).

## 4 The repertory of animal-based insults and some ethological reasons

This chapter presents a list of frequently used animal-based insults and gives some ethological reasons for the selection of specific species, thereby offering cross-connections between linguistics and ethology. As a more specific topic, gender aspects of insults will be treated in section 5.

In the simplest case, animal-based insults relate to singular body parts or patterns of behavior. Because all perceptible deviations of human appearance have much flashier counterparts in animals, we coin and easily understand expressions such as “sheep eyes” or “shark smile.” Obviously, these expressions are not used literally but only to make an analogy between two entities. This figure of speech is called “metaphor” in linguistics and states at least one similarity between a well-known source domain and a lesser-known target domain. In all expressions investigated here, animal appearance or behavior serves as a source domain for human appearance or behavior. Thus, a person with “stork legs” is not a man-bird hybrid, but merely has one quality (the “*tertium comparationis*”) in common with storks, namely, long and skinny legs. A second example is the colloquial terms “beaver” and “pussy” for the human vulva, the common feature being the soft fur. Depending on cultural stereotypes, each language uses many zoomorphic traits to describe humans.

Most animal-based insults relate to domesticated animals because they are best known. The choice of animal depends on culture and epoch: “Which animal names form the basis of insults vary from culture to culture and depend on cultural stereotypes for the animals” (Jay 2000: 196). Homer could praise the goddess Hera as “cow-eyed” because in Ancient Greece cows were esteemed for having beautiful, gentle, and soulful eyes. Today, the epithet “cow-eyed” would be interpreted as an insult because we consider the gaze of cows to be mindless (as expressed in the saying “like a cow staring at a new gate”).

Havryliv (2009: 167) emphasizes that translations of insults must be based not on the animal name but on the “*tertium comparationis*” (cf. section 6.2). An animal that has a negative reputation in the source language may have a neutral or even a positive one in the target language. For example, “Ochse” [ox] in German is an insult because the stereotypical characterization of an ox is “stupid,” whereas in Ukrainian it is clearly positive, namely, “industrious.”

Much more productive are comparisons of behavior uttered in different situations, from friendly to violent ones. A mother may tenderly call her spinach-splashing toddler “my little piglet.” In one’s local pub, the toast “Cheers, you old stud!” is just joshing among friends (cf. sections 2 and 5.2). But if we really get

angry, we choose expressions with a strong negative connotation like “cow,” “rat,” or “baboon.”

After investigating animal-based terms for women, Whaley and Antonelli (1983) claim that they correlate to four categories of animals, namely, pets, pests, cattle, and wild animals. Although it is a useful starting point, this classification is neither complete nor exclusive to insulting women. For example, a classification based on the manner of food acquisition provides a finer grid (cf. section 4.1).

#### 4.1 Animal-based insults referring to manner of food acquisition or disgusting appearance

Some groups of animals elicit very negative metaphors due to their manner of food acquisition (cf. Schmauks 2008).

As stated in section 3.2, predators like lions, bears, and eagles evoke ambivalent feelings. Although we admire their strength and beauty (cf. the metaphorical verb “lionize”), we still see them as dangerous enemies. The term “predatory capitalism” denotes economic systems based on the unregulated search for profit, with each player being either predator or prey. Equally popular are metaphors that mention well-known predatory species. The film *The Caiman* (*Il caimano*, Moretti 2006)<sup>10</sup> uncovers how the political career of Silvio Berlusconi is inextricably linked with his position as a media magnate. The term “shark” signifies a ruthless, vicious, greedy, or dishonest person; subspecies are “loan shark” and “property shark.” A “shark tank” is a closed space in which one is surrounded by extremely dangerous enemies but unable to escape.

Scavengers feeding on carrion have a purely negative reputation even though they fill a valuable ecological niche. So-called “vulture funds” invest in debt from companies that are weak or already dying, the investors being compared to vultures patiently waiting for the carcass of the organization in question. Hyenas are known for their loud cries that resemble hysterical human laughter (“to laugh like a hyena”). The term “coyote” may be used for older men who prey on younger women, or for someone who makes money by illegally smuggling immigrants across the border of the United States.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to animals living in symbiosis, parasites are characterized by an asymmetric relationship: they feed on their hosts without reciprocally “giving something back.” Consequently, being a “social parasite” means to live not off

<sup>10</sup> Moretti, Nanni. 2006. *The Caiman* (*Il caimano*). Sacher Film.

<sup>11</sup> Urban Dictionary. <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=coyote> (accessed 13 July 2013).

one's own efforts, but at public expense. Because we cannot see parasites that live inside their hosts, there are no metaphors referring to "endoparasites" such as tapeworms and flukes. "Ectoparasites" such as fleas and mosquitoes, however, are better known and thus more hated. Whereas some of them live permanently on the skin of their hosts (like lice), others attach to it only temporarily (like ticks). Leeches have an especially bad reputation as slimy and disgusting bloodsuckers. But whereas leeches in reality take only one blood meal, leeches in metaphor are suspected to suck their hosts dry. The subject-specific expression "file-leech" (or "file-sucker") denotes people who extensively use the software of others in peer-to-peer networks without reciprocally sharing their own resources.<sup>12</sup> Someone who is simply annoying may be called a "gadfly." Even more repulsive is a "crab louse" because it lives in the pubic hair (a taboo region).

Equally unpopular are food competitors. When locusts migrate, one swarm may cover hundreds of square miles, damaging or devouring crops and all vegetation. In the *Book of Exodus*, locusts are one of the Ten Plagues that God inflicted upon Egypt because the Pharaoh had refused to free the Israelite slaves. Today, we call unscrupulous stockbrokers "financial locusts" because of their comparably destructive effects. Due to similar reasons, "cormorant" became an insulting term for greedy persons. Real cormorants are skillful divers feeding on fish, but they frequently come into conflict with anglers who see them as rivals and demand reductions of their numbers.

In zoology, the term "ruminant" denotes herbivorous mammals that regurgitate their only semi-digested cud and chew it a second time. Used as a metaphor, ruminants are people who think and talk about one single topic over and over again. The German term "Wiederkäuer" is even worse because it denotes someone who loves to re-chew the cud of others.

Many animals arousing human disgust or anger can be grouped within the umbrella term "household pests." Some of them may even cause phobias although they are known to be harmless. Features that qualify an animal as a target for fear are manifold, for example a suspicious kind of locomotion or a hairy skin. Snakes hide in vegetation, slither silently without legs, and kill their prey by poisoning or asphyxiating them. Rats live in sewers, skillfully climb through our outflow pipes, eat scraps, and are clever enough to escape human persecution. Spiders have eight skinny legs and a strange mode of locomotion, constantly changing between flashing and pausing. The term "creepy crawlies" is highly anthropocentric, bunching together very different arthropods for a negative effect.

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<sup>12</sup> Urban Dictionary. <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=file-leech>. (accessed 13 July 2013).

Soft toys called “Giantmicrobes,” however, show that even “critters” can be staged as cuddly pets.<sup>13</sup>

## 4.2 Other frequent allegations

The following list of typical examples is intended to show how frequently we criticize human shortcomings with respect to specific animals (compare Aman 1996; for more gender-specific insults see sections 5.2 and 5.3). Some terms do not necessarily mean the same thing in both languages. For example, “Pudel” [poodle] is not used in German to mean “a submissive or compliant person,” but “poodle” does mean that in English, especially when used in a political context. On the other hand, “Kamel” [camel] and “Rhinozeros” [rhinoceros] are very common German terms meaning “stupid person,” but these animals are unknown as insults in English. Therefore, German expressions are given in square brackets if the animal names are not nearly identical (wolf/“Wolf”) and if the allegation is not self-explanatory (all bulky animals are suitable for mocking fat people).

- stupid: ass [Esel], camel, cow [Kuh], dodo, dog [Hund], donkey [Esel], goose [Gans], stag [Hirsch], rhinoceros, sheep [Schaf], turkey [Truthahn]; amoeba-brain, bird-brain, chicken-brain [Amöben-, Vogel-, Hühnerhirn]
- silly, foolish: ape, monkey [Affe]
- uncreative: herd animal [Herdentier], parrot [Papagei]
- greedy: cormorant [Kormoran], lion, “a lion’s share” [Löwe, Löwenanteil], pig [Schwein], wolf, “to wolf down” [Wolf, herunterschlingen]
- fat: hippo, pot-bellied pig, rhinoceros, walrus, whale
- ugly: rat [Ratte], toad [Kröte], warthog [Warzenschwein]
- impure, dirty: pig [Schwein], rat [Ratte]
- smelly: billy-goat [Ziegenbock], fox [Fuchs], skunk [Stinktief]
- slimy: jellyfish [Qualle], snail [Schnecke], snake [Schlange]
- cruel or ruthless: hyena, vulture [Geier], wolf
- sly: fox [Fuchs], rat [Ratte], snake [Schlange], weasel [Wiesel]
- dishonest: magpie, steal like a magpie [Elster, stehlen wie eine Elster]
- deceitful, deceptive: snake (in the grass) [Schlange]
- evasive: weasel [Wiesel]
- wretched: cur [Köter], worm [Wurm]
- subversive: mole [Maulwurf]

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<sup>13</sup> GIANTmicrobes. <http://www.giantmicrobes.com/us/main/giantmicrobes-originals> (accessed 13 July 2013).

- arrogant: turkey [Truthahn]
- show-off, vain: peacock [Pfau]
- aggressive and tenacious: pit bull
- brutal, brutish: ape, baboon [Affe], gorilla
- impudent: dog [Hund], jay [Eichelhäher]
- cowardly: cur [Köter], worm [Wurm]
- submissive, compliant: poodle, sheep [Schaf]
- vicious and dangerous: Rottweiler, shark [Hai]
- nasty, vicious: bitch [Hündin]
- lazy: dog [Hund], sloth [Faultier]
- slow: snail [Schnecke]
- parasitic: leech [Blutegel]
- voracious: locust [Heuschrecke]
- contemptible: cur [Köter]
- grouchy, ill-tempered: crab [Filzlaus]
- shy: mouse [Maus]
- talkative: parrot [Papagei]

In contrast to such obvious terms of abuse, trickier insults are detected only at second glance. For example, the offense “amoeba-brain” does not refer to a small brain, but even worse to a non-existing brain. Instead of calling someone an ape, one could request: “Please come out of the jungle and start practicing erect posture!” Freud cited some veiled insults in his book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. The underlying operation called “reduction” occurs in joke-techniques as well as in dream-work. One hilarious example is the perplexing utterance “Vanity is one of his four Achilles’ heels” (Freud (1965 [1905]): 20). Only after some reasoning about the number of feet that humans and animals have, the listener will burst into laughter.

This possibility of wrapping a negative judgment about a person into a funny phrase not only weakens the insult but also stages the speaker as a witty and eloquent person. Matisoff (1996: 11) provides similar features for Yiddish curses and cites the following example: “May he have a sweet death, run over by a sugar truck!”

### 4.3 Misunderstanding animal behavior and counterfactual statements

By and large, man’s rating of animal behavior is deeply influenced by “pride and prejudice.” Frequently, the stereotypical assignment of mainly negative traits to

animals is not grounded in reality. For example, “slippery as a snake” is simply nonsense and can only be uttered by someone who has never touched the animal. In reality, the snake’s smooth and finely structured skin is used as a precious material for fancy accessories such as shoes and purses.

One prime example of misunderstanding animal behavior is the role of pigs in insults. Pigs are valued extremely ambivalently, with terms and phrases involving them ranging from the very positive German “Glücksschwein” (“lucky pig,” in English “lucky dog”) to a wide variety of negative expressions. Calling someone a “pig,” “sow,” “swine,” or “hog” is a serious insult because pigs have a very bad reputation (cf. Watson 2005: 199; Wuketits 2011: Ch. 8). A look into history shows that pigs are assumed to be committers of at least four of the classic Seven Vices, namely, lust, greed, sloth, and gluttony. Whereas Judaism and Islam consider pigs to be unclean and thus inedible, early Christianity used them as common symbols of gluttony. Painters such as Pieter the Elder Brueghel depicted gluttony as a person with a pig’s snout. With regard to the ferocious self-defense of a wounded or cornered wild boar, a fifth vice comes to mind, namely, wrath. Physiologically, pigs are so close to humans that they are ideal donors for heart valves, and pig skin is used in skin grafts for humans. As true omnivores, pigs also feed from carrion if available. This is a further similarity because it is widely assumed that our early ancestors used to eat the remains of the kill of lions or other predators.

Consequently, many popular sayings have handed down this negative image to modern times (cf. Ammer 1999: 84; Schmauks 2004). “Piggery” and “piggish” are direct synonyms for “gluttony” and “greedy.” Some people “eat like a hog” or are “as clumsy as a hog on ice.” Modern colloquial expressions such as “road hog” and “server hog” indicate forms of selfish greed in non-food areas. “To pig it” is to wallow in filth, and a stubborn person may be called “pig-headed.” In sharp contrast to this image as greedy, lazy, and dirty animals, pigs in reality are selective gourmets, simply need long rest periods, and wallow in mud for the purpose of cooling off and protecting themselves against parasites. Only when kept in close stables are they forced to wallow in their own excrement, and the resulting “dirty pigs” in a “pigsty” are solely caused by human treatment. Even the fatness of domesticated pigs is due to selective breeding whereas wild boars never get fat, due to a lack of food in winter.

Donkeys and mules, too, have been misunderstood for millennia. Since Aesop’s time, they have been viewed as stupid and stubborn. As a matter of fact, donkeys evolved in complex mountainous areas where they had to carefully examine a new situation before proceeding. Thus they tend to resist all attempts to urge them into something they perceive to be dangerous, a sign that they might be wiser than their handlers.



Another prejudice is the assumption that male animals are generally more dangerous than females. There are at least a few counterexamples. In wild boars, females protecting their piglets tend to be much more aggressive than solitary males. And although the male lion, the “king of animals,” impresses us with his huge mane, powerful paws, and frightening roar, the lionesses of the pride do most of the hunting.

Equally counterfactual is the German expression “Rabeneltern” [raven parents], meaning “highly neglectful and uncaring parents.” In reality, both raven parents fondly feed and hatch their altricial fledglings (Reichholf 2009: 44, 82). It is assumed that the negative term was coined after witnessing baby birds that had fallen from the nest sitting seemingly abandoned on the ground. In fact, such birds are still fed and attentively protected by their parents.

In the face of all these misunderstandings, a deeper knowledge of animal behavior is highly desirable. One pioneer in this area is the American animal scientist Temple Grandin, whose books are intended to explain animals, especially pets and livestock, from their own worldviews (Grandin and Johnson 2006, 2010).

In other insults, the choice of a species seems completely arbitrary. For example, no zoological fact can explain why a strange person is called a “queer fish” [komischer Fisch] in English but “komischer Vogel” [queer bird] in German.

A last group of insults are knowingly bizarre. In the case of joshing, the speaker often chooses rude comparisons. One example is “as crazy as a shithouse rat” [verrückt wie eine Scheißhausratte]. Here, the rat’s strange habitat has been carefully elected because it is not mentioned in decent conversations (cf. section 6).

## 5 Gender aspects of animal-based insults

Insulting and being insulted has several gender aspects. This section concentrates on the question of whether the content of animal-based insults is grounded in the sexual behavior of the animals in question.

Some other gender aspects of rude language can only be mentioned here, e.g., public acceptance. Insulting, like all swearing in public, is viewed as more appropriate for men. Especially when meeting in their local pub, groups of men are constantly involved in teasing each other, joking, and wisecracking. The result may sound chaotic and aggressive to people not acquainted with this language game, but in fact it expresses and promotes group cohesion (cf. section 2). Women may use equally many and rude expressions but prefer non-public settings. When chatting with girlfriends, mocking absent persons may express trust and intimacy. In addition, many women working in traditionally male occupations,

as well as hard-core feminists, have been known to swear and curse “like a sailor/trooper/mule-driver/mule-skinner.”

Not investigated in detail are insults referring to human treatment of animals. Sexual intercourse with animals is a strong taboo, but according to folk-psychology and folklore, it occurs frequently in backward rural areas. The suffix “-fucker” added to the name of common livestock provides tailor-made insults. For example, “pig-fucker” is a pejorative name for rednecks, whereas “camel-fucker” and “donkey-fucker” are racist terms for men in Arab countries. Choosing small animals like chickens additionally implies a small penis (cf. “ant-fucker” in section 6).

Although these expressions already seem sufficiently rude, they can easily be further intensified. One funny example is “incestuous pig-fucker”<sup>14</sup>, implying incest as a second perversion. The speaker seemingly wants to intensify the insult by combining three allegations, namely: (a) the addressee has sexual intercourse with pigs, which are disgusting animals, (b) they are close relatives, and consequently (c) he himself is a pig. But taken literally, these allegations would neutralize each other because being a pig and mating with other pigs (whether they are relatives or not) is a completely normal pig-behavior.

Before investigating gender-specific insults, the relation between biological sex and grammatical gender has to be clarified.

## 5.1 Biological sex and grammatical gender

Many linguistics textbooks use animal names as a prime example for distinguishing biological sex and grammatical gender. Most vertebrates have two biological sexes, namely, male and female. It depends on the language as to which extent they are reflected in grammatical categories. In German, each noun is either masculine, feminine, or neuter, but the relation between species names and biological sex is arbitrary. For example, it would be hard to explain why “der Frosch” [the frog] is masculine whereas “die Kröte” [the toad] is feminine. As English nouns lack this aspect, they avoid these problems:

- der Hund/the dog
- die Katze/the cat
- das Schwein/the pig

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<sup>14</sup> Urban Dictionary. <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=incestuous+pig-fucker> (accessed 13 July 2013).

Different nouns for male and female animals only exist if they perceptibly differ in appearance or behavior. The zoological term “dimorphism” is used if the sexes strongly differ in color or size, or if they have special body parts for courtship displays or fights. Frequently, males have impressive manes (lion), antlers (deer), tusks (wild boar), mandibles (stag beetle) or ornamental feathers (peacock).

Most differences are connected to sexual and reproductive behavior. Many male mammals claim a territory by urine marking, whereas birds use songs that may be audible over a long distance. Males fight with each other to try and impress females who show their readiness to mate by visual, acoustic, or olfactory signals. These differences between the sexes are rooted in their complementary roles in reproduction. Males maximize their reproductive success by inseminating many females, whereas females carefully select a male because they invest much more in their offspring.

We can even distinguish the sex in some small pests, e.g., only female mosquitoes suck blood from mammals and they are smaller than males. In species such as hedgehogs or snakes, however, non-experts will fail completely to see the difference. When considering the whole animal realm, the existence of two sexes is only one variant among several other models. Snails, for example, are hermaphrodites, and many fishes can change their sex, reproductive functions inclusive.

For important domesticated animals and some wild animals, we have three terms, namely, one term for the species and two terms for the sexes:

<i>species</i>	<i>female</i>	<i>male</i>
cattle	cow	bull
horse	mare	stallion
pig	sow	boar
ass	jenny	jack
goat	doe/nanny	buck/billy
sheep	ewe	ram
chicken	hen	cock/rooster
bee	queen (bee)	drone
cat	queen	tom
deer	doe	buck
fox	vixen	reynard/dog
swan	pen	cob

Sometimes, the species name and female name are identical, thereby reflecting the higher number and greater significance of females in agriculture:

<i>species</i>	<i>female</i>	<i>male</i>
goose	goose	gander
duck	duck	drake

In the opposite case, the species name and male name are identical. With the exception of “bitch,” the female names are formed by adding the suffix “-ess”:

<i>species</i>	<i>male</i>	<i>female</i>
dog	dog	bitch
lion	lion	lioness
tiger	tiger	tigress
leopard	leopard	leopardess

In all other species, one has to add the adjectives “male” or “female” if necessary. As a second possibility, German uses the suffixes “-männchen” [male] and “-weibchen” [female]. Thus “male fly” and “female fly” could be translated as “Fliegenmännchen” und “Fliegenweibchen.”

## 5.2 Animal-based insults for men

As in gender-neutral insulting, many expressions denote stupidity, especially “dumbass” and “jackass.” When referring to going crazy, common expressions are “to go ape” or “to go apeshit.” A more sophisticated diagnosis, based on comparing phylogenesis and phenotype, is the following cheeky remark: “We all sprang from apes, but you didn’t spring far enough.”

The most productive source domain for insulting men is the species-specific male courtship behavior for impressing females and expelling male rivals. It consists of threat displays, aggressive sounds, and olfactory signs (cf. section 5.1). Rutting boars, for example, produce large quantities of strong-smelling saliva that they smear on trees to attract females in heat. Similar sayings are

- as vain as a peacock [eitel wie ein Pfau]
- as proud as a rooster on the dunghill [stolz wie ein Hahn auf dem Mist]

A striking fact is the asymmetry in judging the behavior of the sexes. Whereas horniness and promiscuous behavior are seen as positive in men, the same features are serious defects in women (cf. section 5.3). Expressions like “horny stallion,” “stud,” or “bull” vacillate between disapproval, envy, and (maybe grudging) admiration. The German terms “Deckhengst” [covering stallion, stud] and

“Dorfstier” [village bull] intensify this impact because they denote single male animals that are used for inseminating all the female animals of a larger area.

It must be added that some animals have been fertility symbols in earlier times, mainly the cock, bull, and buck. The *Kamasutra* even delimits three groups of men according to the length of their penises, namely, hare, bull, and stallion.

The expressions “ox” [Ochse] and “wether” [Hammel] express double insults because the male animals referred to are castrated. They imply stupidity as well as a lack of masculinity, or even impotence. Some further negative male attributes and the corresponding animals are:

- cowardly: chicken [Huhn], hare [Hase]
- quarrelsome: gamecock [Kampfhahn]
- stubborn: mule [Maulesel]
- clumsy: buffalo [Büffel]

### 5.3 Animal-based insults for women

Animal-based expressions for women mostly refer to female animals, and they cover the whole range from pet names to insults. For example, “chick” is a gentle name for a girl, whereas “cow” denotes stupidity, clumsiness, or uncreative herd-behavior.

Whereas a strong sex drive is sometimes seen as an advantage in men (cf. section 5.2), it is judged as a serious shortcoming in women. Sexual recklessness is compared to the behavior of female animals, “shamelessly” signaling to males that they are in heat. In innumerable advertisements on the internet, “lustful bitches” offer all kinds of sexual services. Outside of these explicit contexts, the meaning of “bitch” has been expanded from “uncontrolled sexuality” to a more general critique of female personality, revolving around accusations of “deception,” “spitefulness,” “nastiness,” and “viciousness” (cf. Williams 2011: 35). Nasty backbiting among girlfriends is called a “bitching session.” A “gaggle of bitches” is defined as a “loud and sometimes obnoxious group of college girls”<sup>15</sup>.

In German sayings, goats are involved in a variety of negative statements. The adjective “zickig” [goaty] denotes an unpleasant combination of “silly,” “fickle,” and “overexcited,” and the derived verb “herumzicken” the correlated behavior.

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<sup>15</sup> Urban Dictionary. <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Gaggle%20of%20Bitches> (accessed 13 July 2013).

The compound “Gewitterziege,” literally “thunderstorm goat,” may be the result of the observation that the charged atmosphere before a storm makes people quarrelsome.

The zoological basis of several phrases is the fact that in some social species even females fight out a dominance hierarchy. The expression “pecking order” stems from observing hens and other poultry. Closely related is the term “cat-fight” (cf. section 6.2), denoting spiteful rivalry among women. In contrast, “hen party” is merely descriptive, referring to a party only for girls or women.

One special allegation against women is their tendency to nag. Consequently they are compared to (female) animals exhibiting annoying vocal behavior, such as bleating goats. In German, snipe birds have the colloquial name “Himmelsziege” [literally: sky goat] because their calls resemble those of goats. Persistent chatting is compared to the cackling of hens or the gabbling of geese, or the talkative woman in question could be called “garrulous as a magpie” [schwatzhaft wie eine Elster]. In contrast to these awkward shrills, “cooing” is a soft female sound, usually employed for the enchantment of men, and “chirping” also has a positive connotation. “Chirpy” is even used as a synonym for “cheerful.” Finally, mindlessly repeating the statements and opinions of others is called “parroting.”

Particularly close is the connection between women and cats, although they have a similarly ambivalent reputation as that of pigs (cf. section 4.3). In ancient Egypt, cats were worshipped because they killed mice and rats in granaries. The feline goddess Bastet was associated with positive attributes such as fertility, love, and joie de vivre. In the age of witch-hunting, however, cats (especially black ones) were seen as allies of the devil, burned alive, or otherwise tortured and killed. This enigmatic status of cats continues today. On the one hand, cats are soft and cuddly, thus representing sweetness and grace. On the other hand, cats are considered willful because they do not submit to people as obediently as dogs do. The main allegation against cats is deceitfulness, since feline mood can change abruptly. A cat may genuinely enjoy cuddling for a long period of time, then suddenly scratch (perhaps this is not due to feline deceit, but rather the inability of the cuddling person to detect the change of mood in time).

With regard to their physical appearance, women are much more scrutinized and criticized than men. As the stereotypical color of mice is grey, the epithet “mousy” [mausgrau] may be used for a plain or unattractive woman. Calling a special type of older woman an “old crow” [alte Krähe] refers to skinny legs, dark clothing, and a tendency to nag. In German, the term “Brillenschlange” is the name of the spectacled cobra as well as a nickname for a woman with glasses. Geese are sometimes associated with ugliness in an unspecific way. A more specific allegation is obesity. Besides the fat animals already mentioned in section 4.2, obese women are often compared to fleshy female livestock. The most fre-

quent expressions, adding the adjective “fat” to accentuate the offense, are “fat pig” and “fat cow.”

Such insults are seen today as a sign of so-called lookism, defined as discrimination of people because of their physical appearance. A well-known proverb, however, although emphasizing the insignificance of physical appearance, is even more offensive. “In the night all cats are grey” has an explicit sexual reading, suggesting that physical appearance is not relevant when using women as sex partners.

## 6 Interlingual aspects

This last section compares animal-based insults in English and German. Only sometimes do the two languages correlate a human shortcoming to the same animal. Other expressions, however, simply rely on the same animal feature that stretches across several species. Furthermore, some aesthetic features of witty expressions are highlighted (although some readers will find the combination of “insult” and “aesthetic” eccentric).

In section 4.3 it was already stated that pigs have the same bad reputation in English and in German. Some further examples for identical metaphors are:

- passionate reader    bookworm    Bücherwurm
- dangerous place    shark tank    Haifischbecken
- quarrelsome man    gamecock    Kampfhahn
- (arrogant) leader    bellwether    Leithammel

In each case, careful retracing could examine whether these expressions arose from literal translation. For example, the German insult “Ameisenficker” [ant-fucker] seems to be a one-to-one take-over from the Dutch “mierenneuker.” And even Anglophones who have never heard the expression “ant-fucker” before will spontaneously understand that it makes fun of a nitpicker. Some further examples only differ in their degree of specification:

- frequent party visitor    party animal    Partylöwe [party lion]
- fool    birdbrain    Spatzenhirn [sparrow-brain]

Because animals are not the only source domain for insulting terms, in many examples only one language refers to them. Whereas in English a stubborn person may be called “bull-headed” or “pig-headed,” German uses the unspecific term “dickköpfig,” literally “having a thick skull.”

## 6.1 Some pitfalls of translation

Especially when using terms of abuse, a literal translation can easily fail. Translated verbatim, the well-known and usually mistranslated German term “Schweinehund” [literally: pig-dog] seems to combine negative traits of pigs and dogs. However, this is incorrect. “Schweine-” [pig-] is merely a general pejorative prefix, and “Hund” [dog] a general pejorative term meaning “fellow, chap, guy.” Thus, “Schweinehund” and its synonym “Sauhund” mean “nasty son-of-a-bitch,” “dirty bastard,” “repulsive swine,” “rotten scumbag,” and worse. A “pig-dog” denotes only an Australian dog bred for hunting wild boars.

Like “Schweine-,” the German “Sau-” [pig-] is a common pejorative and intensifying prefix. Examples of nouns and adjectives: “Sauarbeit” [pig-job = wretched job], “Sauwetter” [pig-weather = rotten weather], “Saukerl” [pig-fellow = despicable guy], “saudumm” [pig-stupid = very stupid], “saufrech” [pig-impudent = very impudent], or “sauteuer” [pig-expensive = very expensive].

Translation problems become tougher if the expression in question has intended artistic features that should be maintained in the target language. In German, talented blustering fellows intensify insults preferably by alliterating prefixes or suffixes, resulting in fancy but not necessarily meaningful compounds such as “Affenarsch” [ape’s arse], “Riesenrindvieh” [giant cattle], or “Zimtziege” [cinnamon goat]. By adding adjectives or other supplements, the compounds may be further elaborated, as in “alberner Affenarsch” [foolish ape’s arse]. Here, a one-to-one translation would be difficult because compound nouns are less frequent in English.

Similar problems arise when translating onomatopoeic expressions, i.e., words that are coined for imitating specific sounds. A famous example is the language-specific mimicking of the rooster’s call. Whereas German roosters crow “Kikeriki,” their English colleagues say “Cock-a-doodle-doo,” a verbalization that sounds rather bizarre for Germans. The German name of the Bactrian camel is “Trampeltier” [trampling animal], which when spoken sounds like a clumsy locomotion, and is used to insult someone deemed to be bumbling and awkward. When encountering this word, the translator may either change it to another animal such as “elephant,” or drop the reference to animals completely and simply use a phrase like “clumsy oaf.”

Wordplay, too, is language-specific and therefore difficult to translate. Germans may use the funny term “Beutelratte.” Taken literally, it is the common name for the opossum. Since opossums are marsupials carrying their young in a pouch, “Beutelratte” [pouch rat] is also a nickname for trade fair visitors who greedily stuff all free samples into their pouches.

The examples sketched here show that joshing is a language game in which human creativity may emerge. In the case of animal-based insults, the inventor



has to detect similarities between species and to describe them lucidly. Especially in the settings characterized in sections 2 and 5.2, the hearers of new expressions may or will glowingly elaborate them to even more hilarious compounds.

## 6.2 Relying on the “tertium comparationis”

In the most interesting examples of insults, the two languages mention animals that are zoologically far apart from man but share one feature that correlates to the human shortcoming (the “tertium comparationis,” cf. section 4). The following examples are intended to give an insight into the problems a translator faces when encountering such animal-based insults:

### *prostitute*

- alley cat (a stray, i.e., streetwalker)
- Bordsteinschwalbe [curbstone swallow]

### *altercation between women*

- catfight (vicious and unfair)
- Zickenkrieg [goat war]

### *illegal, greedy data collector*

- data leech (parasite, freeloader)
- Datenkrake [data octopus: many arms that grab]

### *clumsy person*

- bull in a china shop
- Elefant im Porzellanladen [elephant in a china shop]

### *immature person*

- fledgling (young and unable to fly)
- Grünschnabel [green beak]

### *mad person*

- to have bats in the belfry (fluttering, chaotic, disturbed thoughts)
- einen Vogel haben [to have a bird]

### *timid person*

- chicken, mouse (small and defenseless)
- Angsthase [anxious hare]

## 7 Conclusion

Animal-based insulting of humans has been shown to be an interesting topic in cognitive linguistics. Firstly, it sheds light on our inconsistent mental model of the human-animal relationship. On the one hand, we purposefully use animal names for insulting because they locate the addressee “below” mankind, namely, in the animal realm. On the other hand, numberless expressions emphasize similarities between humans and animals, hinting at a degree of equality.

Secondly, many insults are based on ecological facts, thus rendering instructive cross-connections between linguistics and zoology. For example, species with undesirable manners of food acquisition find themselves part of very negative metaphors such as “predatory capitalism” and “vulture funds.” For gender-specific insults, we prefer the names of pets or livestock of the same sex, e.g., “chicken” versus “cock.” The species-specific courtship behavior is a particularly productive source domain for terms such as “horny boar” versus “bitch.” Doubly offensive are the names of castrated males (“ox,” “wether”) because they additionally deny masculinity.

As a third reason they are interesting, and in contrast to the second one, some animal-based insults exemplify our highly anthropocentric worldview. Expressions such as “stupid donkey” are not based on zoological facts, but rather on our misunderstanding of meaningful animal behavior. One important desideratum for the future is therefore more research on human-animal relationships in order to improve our knowledge about the behaviors and needs of the animals we share the world with.

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