### Animal Expressions in English

What do animals have to do with the English language? A whole lot!

You’ll be surprised to know just how many English expressions involve animals.

Consider some of the fascinating ways in which animals are involved in everyday English.

Let’s begin with a basic linguistic process, the analogy.

An analogy is a comparison between two things and a convenient way for language to create new meanings.

Animals are usually used because they are familiar to everyone.

By way of analogy, animal expressions draw on the similarities between animals and humans.

People who are not courageous are called “chickens,” while brave leaders are said to be “lionhearted.”

In most cases, it is not hard to see the logic behind the comparisons.

Animal analogies are based on close observation of animal behavior.

However, what if the casual observation leads to false assumptions, or misinterpretation gets in the way?

Interestingly, this has often been the case with English animal expressions.

“Crocodile tears” is a good example. One is said to weep “crocodile tears” if they pretend to be sad when they are not.
The idea comes from the popular belief that crocodiles weep over the prey they kill.

The fact is, crocodiles seem to cry while they eat, but this is because their eyes are stimulated when the muscles around the mouth move to eat.

Their tears are only a physical response with nothing to do with feelings.

“Making a beeline” also belongs to the group of animal expressions based on flawed observation.

“A beeline” typically means a straight line between two points.

If you “make a beeline for” someone or something, you go straight toward your destination, ignoring everything else along the way.

For instance, your mom might have told you to make a beeline home after school.

Now you may wonder if bees really fly straight to where they want to go.

The answer is, usually they do not. As you may have observed, they make irregular twists and turns in their flight.

They often stop to rest and take a long way around.

It is only when they return home with a load of honey that they make a straight line.

In the case of the bee, only part of the truth came to represent the whole.

Even though many people know that these analogies are not based on science, the expressions do not easily disappear in the language.
In fact, partly due to these expressions, some people still hold the belief that crocodiles weep and bees always fly straight to their destination.

Sometimes, the meaning of analogies may not be obvious.

For instance, what comes to mind when you hear the phrase “white elephant” or “black sheep”?

Most people, hearing these phrases for the first time, cannot correctly guess their meanings.

The expression “white elephant” comes from Thailand.

Long ago, in Thailand, white elephants were very rare. Whenever one was found, it was given to the king.

The king would then give it as a royal “gift” to someone he did not like since the beautiful animal cost a fortune to take care of.

Nobody could refuse such a present, but it could financially ruin its owner.

Moreover, it was a serious crime to mistreat a present from the king.

Even riding it was not allowed, so a white elephant was almost useless.

The expression, introduced in England in the 18th century, turned out to be useful for describing costly but useless public building.

Today, it is used to refer to anything that might be costly and useless to someone.
Black sheep, like white elephants, are not common, and they also mean trouble for their owners.

The expression is from the English history of sheep farming.

Long ago, black wool was worthless because it was almost impossible to dye.

When a black sheep was born, the owners saw it as bad luck.

Today the expression “black sheep” refers to an odd and unpopular member of a family or a group, perhaps because the unpopular black sheep stood out in a group of white sheep.

These interesting expressions are only a few examples of the English expressions having to do with animals.

Watch for others as you learn more English.

Be curious about them and research their roots. It is a fun way to learn the language.