

# Animals enliven human language

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In one of Aesop's best-known fables, *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, the grasshopper goofs around all summer and makes fun of the ants, who spend their days storing food for the long winter ahead. Professor of English Debra Hawhee is studying the ways in which animal characters and metaphors were used to teach language skills. Credit: public domain / Milo Winter

When Debra Hawhee reads *Mother Goose and Aesop's Fables* to her 5-year-old daughter, she hears in them the usual social lessons—and an additional layer of meaning besides.

"Of course, the fables were written to teach kids how to behave toward each other," she says, "but they also involved thinking about how to use language. They offer commentary on the art of speaking."

A professor of English at Penn State, Hawhee studies how people use language, especially how we use it to influence others. A few years ago, while teaching a survey of rhetoric starting with the ancient Greeks, she noticed how often the classical authors—philosophers as well as storytellers—referred to [animals](#).

"The assumption might be that rhetoric deals with language and that's not really part of what animals do, but instead the earliest Western theories and pedagogies of language included animals in a robust way and in a variety of ways," she says. "And I said, this is going to be my next project—I'm going to figure out what this is all about."

## **Once upon a time**

Hawhee has almost finished writing a book about what she learned. Her research has spanned a couple of millennia, from Aesop in the 6th century B.C. to Erasmus, the 16th-century Dutch scholar.

"I usually begin with English translations to identify passages I'd like to examine more carefully, and from there I go to the Greek or the Latin," says Hawhee, whose facility with both ancient languages enables her to be confident that she is not being misled by translations, some of which were completed a hundred years ago or more.

Some of the texts were clearly written for children or teachers of children. Hawhee thinks they often feature animals because such characters engage a child's imagination in ways a classroom lesson about rhetoric can't.

One example first appeared in a manual from the second century A.D. "It's an assignment for kids to pretend they're an ape and they're going to convince their ape friends to build a city," says Hawhee. "It's more fun [than a lecture], partly because it's calling on their imagination and also because it's not asking them to actually form a government. It's introducing it at a different level. It also gave them practice speaking for somebody else."

Animal examples also played a big role in popular guidebooks for adults who wanted to become better public speakers, along the lines of a self-help book. The manuals would talk about how to use animals to exemplify certain traits or behaviors in a brief, memorable way: Dogs are friendly, oxen are strong, foxes are clever and usually up to no good.

"Erasmus says it's about livening up our language," says Hawhee. "If you're describing how somebody talks, especially if they're disappointing you, don't just say they talk, say they're bleating. If you can't hear them, they're meowing."





Another fable from Aesop, The Tortoise and the Hare, gave us the proverb "Slow and steady wins the race." Penn State scholar Debra Hawhee is exploring the ways animals were used in early texts on how to make our language vivid and persuasive. Credit: public domain / Milo Winter

Mentioning a familiar animal will trigger a response in the audience that is much more direct and visceral than an abstract word like "courage," she says. In a treatise on writing style, Greek author Longinus used an image of a wounded lion whose tail was still twitching in defiance. "He can't move, but the will to move is still very apparent and his spirit is still intact," says Hawhee. "I think using the energy of animals, and the vividness, is a highly effective way of writing. There are a lot of these qualities of language that are really difficult to teach, and that's where the use of animal imagery comes in."

## **Be as the bees**

In many cases, says Hawhee, the texts she studied go beyond using animal traits to describe human behavior; they advise that we should aspire to be like a specific kind of animal. Erasmus, a prodigious collector of natural history details, was especially keen on honey bees as role models for writers and speech-makers.

"Bees do not collect everything indiscriminately from every source," he wrote. "In the same way, one should not expect to find everything in the same author, but select from each the most useful thing he has. From poets and orators one gets splendor of language, from logicians skill in argument, from philosophers a knowledge of nature, from theologians the principles of the good life."

Another favorite of Erasmus came from the sea. "The octopus was seen as a shape-shifting animal, very flexible, responding to its situation," says Hawhee. "So the proverb 'Be the octopus' meant 'adapt to the situation.' And that's very rhetorical."

Then there are the mock encomia, brief passages lauding creepy-crawly animals we don't normally admire. "The idea was, let's take this to its limit," says Hawhee. "If we're going to exercise ourselves in praising things, let's praise things that you can't imagine praising. So we've got to find the characteristics that we might praise about it. A lot of them are about how amazing it is that they can disrupt so much, given their size."

Dutch Renaissance author Daniel Heinsius sang the praises of the body louse: "It hath made choice of a quiet and retired course of life, not fluttering as birds do, nor skip-hopping as a flea, but according to the dignity of his life, stable and still: he walketh with a slow and gravely composed gate: nor doth he seem to embrace any point of philosophy more than the Pythagorean silence; for nothing disturbeth more the intentiveness of the mind than a hurry and a bustling noise."

Other mock encomia praised flies, fleas, and bedbugs. "I scratched my head most of the time I was writing that chapter!" says Hawhee.

Animals also sometimes served as mnemonic devices to help people remember complex information.

"They provided a way to make images that were very disturbing," says Hawhee. "There's lots of violence and blood and gore in these images that are designed to get people to remember."

One Roman text, for example, suggested that the image of holding a ram's testicle could help a lawyer remember witness testimony in a legal case he was trying, because "testis" and "testimony" derive from the



same root term. "But what happens in the commentary is that suddenly this ram has a body and is charging at you," says Hawhee. "It was a very frightening image."

## Common knowledge

The texts Hawhee is studying came from times when most people lived in close proximity to fleas, foxes, and myriad other creatures that appear in the books. The rhetorical use of animals to represent character types took advantage of the fact that those who read a story or heard a speech were already familiar with those animals and their behavior.

In today's overwhelmingly urban culture, says Hawhee, that kind of knowledge is not so common any more. "I would call it vestigial," she says. Kids today may learn the archetypes from the fables, rather than the fables drawing on their existing familiarity with the animals. She thinks the role of the fables themselves has shifted, too.

"I would say that fables have moved into the entertainment area, sheer amusement," she says. "Fables still carry morals, but it seems like the Disney talking animals are much more entertainment-driven."

Still, animal metaphors and examples remain powerful communication tools. Although no one has made a comprehensive survey, animals also seem to be useful in every language. The details may differ—different aspects of a creature might be emphasized in different cultures—but it's hard to imagine what [language](#) would be like without them. We speak of lions lying down with lambs, we back dark-horse candidates, we name our sports teams after lions and tigers and bears—and we read Peter Rabbit and Mother Goose to our children.

"Animals are useful no matter what the context, it seems," says Hawhee. "One point is that they vary. But another point is that they're always

there."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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