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English and Swedish Animal Idioms
A Study of Correspondence and Variation in Content and Expression

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Abstract

Titel: English and Swedish Animal Idioms - A Study of Correspondence and Variation in Content and Expression

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Abstract: Idioms are found in every language and learning them is an important aspect of the mastery of a language. The English language is no exception as it contains a large number of idioms, which are extensively used. However, because of their rather rigid structure and quite unpredictable meaning, idioms are often considered difficult to learn. Although little research has been done to date on the nature of idioms as well as how they are used, a better understanding of variations in idioms can nevertheless be acquired by looking at some theories and thoughts about their use and their structure.

The aim of this paper is to examine a number of animal idioms, focusing primarily on English idioms and the similarities and differences found in equivalent Swedish idioms, even when the Swedish idioms do not contain an animal. Two types of studies are presented. In the first one, the English and Swedish animal idioms collected are grouped into four categories. The results of such a categorization show that half of the English animal idioms found have an equivalent in Swedish containing an animal. In the second study, the content, structure, wording, semantics and metaphorical meaning of the animal idioms are analysed and compared. The results indicate that the Swedish animal idioms that correspond to the English animal idioms have, for the most part, the same structures and similar variations in degree of literalness, fixity, manipulation and transformation. Furthermore, the use of metaphor, personification and simile appears to be common both in English and Swedish animal idioms. The role of context and literal and figurative translation are also addressed in this study.

Nyckelord: English and Swedish animal idioms, literal translation, role of context, underlying conceptual metaphor, personification, simile, semantics.
1. Introduction and aims

People often struggle to understand and learn idioms in a foreign language. Several language teachers I have discussed with state that poor knowledge of a native language and its expressions may be an explanation as to why some students have a hard time learning idioms in a different language. Learning an expression in a foreign language can prove difficult if a corresponding idiom is not known and understood in the native language to start with, or if no corresponding idiom exists in the foreign language. Sometimes some idioms have undergone some modifications, such as when they are shortened (e.g. too many cooks (spoil the broth)), or they do not translate literally, making it hard to guess their meanings. Consequently, language teachers also have difficulty in finding ways to teach idiomatic expressions to their students. Because of their rather rigid structure and quite unpredictable meaning, idioms are often considered difficult to learn. However, every language has idioms and learning them is an important aspect of the mastery of a language. The English language is no exception as it contains a large number of idioms, which are extensively used. Despite this fact, the research done to date in this area has not been as extensive as that about other areas of English. It seems indeed that little is known about the nature of idioms as well as how they are used and in what contexts. Moreover, books devoted to listing idioms and presenting ways of understanding and using them have only appeared relatively recently (Fernando 1996:232).

Neither is the nature of idioms clearly defined. While some believe that most idioms are rather informal or as McCarthy (1992:57) explains: “colloquial alternatives to their nearest synonymous literal free forms”, others believe that idioms can sometimes be compared to proverbs. However, a proverb, which is a well-known phrase that expresses something that is generally true, normally retains its original form, while idioms actually do not all seem to be as fixed and invariable (Fernando 1996:44). A closer study of the construction, formation and use of idioms may provide a better understanding of them and give confidence to potential users. In effect, by looking at some theories and thoughts about what idioms are and how different their structure can be, a learner can get a better understanding of variations in idioms and how they can be classified. In some reference books, idioms are listed under broad headings, such as animals, body parts, plants and flowers, colours, etc. Idioms can be further classified, however, according to their structure and the degree to which they are metaphorical.
To further understand idioms, the role of context and of literal and figurative translation also needs to be addressed. As Wikberg (2004:161) suggests it is not always good to literally translate an idiom from English into a foreign language or vice versa, since it may not be understood. Indeed, literal translation does not always work out, the cultural aspects of idioms needing frequently to be taken into account, in order to fully understand them.

This paper is a study of a number of idioms used in the English and the Swedish languages. In order to narrow the scope of this study, I have chosen to focus on animal idioms. Reference books containing English and Swedish animal idioms as well as native speakers of English and Swedish have been consulted and will serve as my data base. This study will focus primarily on English animal idioms and the similarities and differences found in equivalent Swedish idioms, even when the Swedish idioms do not contain an animal.

The aim of this paper is to survey the variation in content and structure of English and Swedish animal idioms. In conducting this survey, I will examine several researchers’ findings in the field. With reference to the research done mainly by Fernando and Moon, I will analyse the literalness and fixity of animal idioms and categorize them accordingly. Furthermore, I will compare the Swedish equivalent of the selected idioms, to see how similar the wording and structure are to the English and if the metaphorical meanings remain. Unless necessary, the context in which these animal idioms are used will not be discussed.

2. **Background**

2.1 **The nature of idioms**

Since humans use idiomatic language in their daily lives, even though they may not be aware of it, it is interesting to consider what idioms are. The definition of the term ‘idiom’ seems to vary considerably from researcher to researcher and may also depend on context. As Moon (1998:3) describes it: “Idiom is an ambiguous term, used in conflicting ways”. For some scholars, like Curry (1988:preface), idioms are often colloquial and slang expressions which when overused can become “clichés”. Fernando (1996:3) defines idioms as being a type of “conventionalized multiword expressions” which are commonly accepted. She explains that the term ‘idiom’ can be inclusive, covering all fixed phrases and figures of speech, such as similes, proverbs and sayings. Fernando’s definition of idioms will be applied in this study since examples of fixed phrases, similes and proverbs are found in animal idioms.
Idioms are generally created by combining words, which already have a meaning of their own. Flavell & Flavell (2001:6) state that an idiom is “a new linguistic entity” whose meaning may be quite different from the significations of the individual words in the idiom. Idioms can indeed have a literal meaning in one context, but a different one in another, e.g. *to see stars* meaning literally ’to see stars in the sky’ or metaphorically ’to seem to see flashes of light as a result of being hit on the head’. In contrast, for other scholars like Moon (1998:4), the term refers only to “fixed and semantically opaque or metaphorical expressions” such as *kick the bucket* meaning ’to die’. This definition of idioms strictly limits the number of expressions considered to be pure idioms.

Research also shows that the use of idioms is mostly common in fiction and conversation and depends on the register (Liu 2003:674). Fernando (1996:72) states that idioms are used as conventional, familiar ways of speaking. However, in her research, Moon (1998:72) found that pure idioms tend to appear mostly in written language, which conflicts with Liu’s findings. Such conflicting views show that researchers are not in agreement with the context in which idioms are used.

Researchers often classify idioms according to their level of literalness and fixity, while dictionaries and reference books classify them either alphabetically, according to their meaning, by theme (e.g. animals, body parts, emotions, colours, food and cooking, etc.) or under a common word (e.g. cat, hand, blue, cake, etc.). Some scholars choose to take it one step further and classify them more specifically. For instance, Moon (1996: 72-73) divides idioms into seven categories, according to the content of their message: actions (e.g. *spill the beans*); events (e.g. *have blood on one’s hands*); situations (e.g. *to be up a gum tree*); people and things (e.g. *a lounge lizard*); attributes (e.g. *as green as grass*); evaluations (e.g. *turn back the clock*); and emotions (e.g. *green with envy*).

### 2.2 Lexical and syntactic variations

In any language there are different types of idioms. According to McCarthy (2003:6), the types of idioms vary in size, form and structure from compounds (e.g. *a bone of contention*) and prepositional phrases (e.g. *in the blink of an eye*) to simile (e.g. *as dry as a bone*) and whole sentences (e.g. *to cut a long story short*). Fernando (1996:34) acknowledges that the rules of grammar apply to the majority of multiword expressions in English. The most
common pattern of idioms is the semi-clausal pattern $V+\text{Det}+N$ (e.g. smell a rat, catch one’s breath), followed by the pattern $\text{Adj}+N$ (e.g. sacred cow, white elephant), whereas the pattern $\text{Prep}+N+\text{Prep}$ (e.g. on behalf of) is less frequent.

2.2.1 Degrees of literalness

Idioms also vary in degrees of literalness and in how metaphorical they are; idioms can be ‘transparent’ (also referred to as ‘literal idioms’), ‘semi-transparent’ (or ‘semi-idioms’) or ‘opaque metaphors’ (or ‘pure idioms’). According to Moon (1998:22-23), the use of a ‘transparent metaphor’ will help the hearer/reader to understand it more easily, as, for example, the idiom to talk behind someone’s back. A ‘semi-transparent metaphor’ may not be understood by all speakers of a language and consequently may require some explanation, as, for example, the idiom to throw in the towel, which means to give up or lose all hope, especially in a competition. Finally, Moon describes ‘opaque metaphors’ as ‘pure idioms’ which are virtually impossible to decode and interpret without the knowledge of their origins, as for example to kick the bucket which can be literally understood as ‘to hit a bucket with one’s foot’, but figuratively as ‘to die’.

Fernando (1996:32, 70-71) also categorises idioms according to three different levels of variance and literalness (“pure”, “semiliteral” and “literal”), but further states that the status of idioms is strengthened or weakened depending on the level of “lexical variance or invariance”.

2.2.2 Degrees of fixity

According to McCarthy (2003:6), the fixity of most idioms is such that changes and variations are impossible. However, there are different degrees of fixity since the vocabulary or grammar of idioms can vary to some extent. In effect, most researchers agree that lexical variations are quite common, where verbs, nouns and adjectives are often substituted (see 2.2.4) Moon (1998:123) adds that when words from the same semantic field are used interchangeably, variations of all kinds do not hinder comprehension, as long as the original metaphor is preserved. Such is the case in some idioms where different words are used due to cultural preferences, e.g. vocabulary differences between British English and American English (see 2.2.5).
Furthermore, Fernando (1996:34, 43) makes a distinction between the fixed parts and non-fixed parts of idioms and their degree of literalness. She states that idioms can range from completely fixed and semantically non-literal to unrestricted and literal. In addition, she explains that, lexically speaking, words such as pronouns may be variable and thus allow their replacement in an idiom. For example, the pronoun somebody in give somebody the cold shoulder can be replaced by John/this woman/a friend, etc.

Moreover, Fernando (1996:43) adds that limitations on replacement in fixed idioms distinguish them from non-idiomatic expressions, where replacements of words are common. These latter are in fact “unrestricted collocations” like catch a bus/train or a second/minute/month/year, etc. elapsed/passed/went by, etc. Fernando (1996:53) compares semi-idioms, which allow minimal variations (e.g. burn one’s boats/bridges), with restricted collocations (e.g. grip/seize/catch/capture one’s imagination), further stating that when it becomes possible to replace parts of pure idioms, they increasingly become “unrestricted collocations” instead.

2.2.3 Degrees of manipulation and transformation: suppressions, rearrangements and additions

Fernando (1996:43) states that the communicative needs of the language users influence the way idioms are “manipulated or transformed”. Some idioms can be shortened (e.g. a bird in the hand (is worth two in the bush)) and still be understood. McCarthy (1992:63) refers to such phenomena as “allusions to an expression”, whose cultural references the reader is able to understand and grasp. The people who use such idioms have indeed a certain cultural lifestyle and also use certain sayings, proverbs and collocations. Similarly, Fernando (1996:51) states that the absence of a part of an idiom (e.g. a rolling stone from a rolling stone gathers no moss) reflects “the fluency and confidence of the language-user”, and that some idioms seldom appear in their full forms (e.g. red herring instead of draw/trail a red herring across the path/track). She adds that it may be difficult for non-native speakers to identify and interpret these shortened idioms if their knowledge of the language is limited and they do not know the full version.

As for the possibility of rearranging the words of an idiom, Fernando (1996:49-50) explains that it varies from idiom to idiom: e.g. ‘John smelt a rat’ cannot be rearranged into *’John was a rat-smeller’, whereas rearrangement is possible in the following idiom, e.g. ‘Talking to
him will open your eyes’ becoming ‘Talking to him was an eye-opening experience’. On the whole, as discussed by Fernando (1996:46), many idioms allow “only minimal variation (e.g. kick the bucket for tense) or are totally invariant (e.g. fat chance you’ve got)”, especially when certain words are parts of a fixed expression in which case they cannot be transformed in any way.

Furthermore, although additions are not normally permitted within idioms, they may sometimes be introduced to emphasize what is said or to make a statement more precise: e.g. ‘It is very easy for those academics to look out of their carpeted ivory towers […]’ (Fernando 1996:48). Moon (1998:130) mostly concurs with Fernando, but adds that it is mostly adjectives that are added or suppressed, as in go the (full) distance, although instances of adverbial variations have been observed, as in make someone turn (over) in their grave. Finally, Moon points out that even a whole nominal group can sometimes be added or suppressed, as in have someone eating out of (the palm of) one’s hand.

2.2.4 Verb, noun, adjective and conjunction variations

The most common variations in idioms are those of verbs and nouns. Such variations may have different effects and may vary depending on the idiom. Sköldberg (2004:310) states that the purpose of varying idioms is to emphasize what is said at the time, as in I’ve got other fish to fry, meaning “to have other more important things to do”. In this idiom, the word ‘other’ can be replaced by ‘bigger’ to emphasize how much more important the other things are. Moreover, in Moon’s view (1998:124), the meaning of an idiom is in most cases barely affected by verb variation: to rest/lean on one’s oars. Another possible verb variation is for example the difference in focus or degree in the verbs used in the idiom to keep/juggle the balls in the air. Even variations in tense are permitted and are rather common: e.g. he smelt a rat (Fernando 1996:44).

In noun variations the nouns used are often synonyms, as in the idiom the calm/lull before the storm. But there are idioms where the substituted nouns are not synonymous and are from different semantic fields, as in the idiom a tower/pillar of strength. Another noun variation is found when a noun in the idiom can be used in the singular or plural: take the wind out of someone’s sail/sails. However, singulars and plurals are not always possible as in raining cats and dogs (*raining a cat and a dog) or in smell a rat (*smell rats) (Fernando 1996:45).
Moreover, some variations can be in gender, as in *you can’t keep a good man/woman down*, while others can be in degree of generality as in *in the teeth of the wind/gale*.

The mental image of the metaphor may differ considerably if one substitutes one noun for another, like in the idiom *a dose/taste of one’s own medicine*, where “a measured portion of something” is different to that of “a gustatory experience of something”. But when they are used in this idiom, the variations of nouns do not affect its meaning that much. In some cases, however, no lexical substitutions are allowed as in idioms such as *smell a rat* where the noun ‘rat’ cannot be replaced by ‘mouse’ (Fernando 1996:45).

Finally, according to Moon (1998:128), the variations of adjectives and conjunctions in idioms are less common. An example of adjective variation is *a bad/rotten apple* where the adjectives are nearly synonymous. As for conjunctions, the ones that are sometimes changed are: *if* replaced by *when* and *like* replaced by *as if* (e.g. *like/as if there’s no tomorrow*).

### 2.2.5 Variations between British and American English

Differences are noticeable when translating idioms from one language to another or when comparing the equivalent idiom in another language. Similarly, the numerous English idioms used in different English speaking countries show differences of all kinds. Moon (1998:133-134) discusses several examples of British (BrE) and American (AmE) idioms where variations can be observed. She explains that lexical differences can be due to cultural preferences (e.g. *like turkeys voting for Christmas* (BrE) – *like turkeys voting for Thanksgiving* (AmE)), but sometimes there may be historical explanations. Moon further states that the most common variations are those of nouns and verbs as seen in the following examples:

- *have green fingers* (BrE) – *have a green thumb* (AmE)
- *keep one’s hair on* (BrE) – *keep one’s shirt on* (AmE)
- *fall through the net* (BrE) – *fall through the cracks* (AmE)
- *cut a long story short* (BrE) – *make a long story short* (AmE)
- *let off steam* (BrE) – *blow off steam* (AmE)
- *touch wood* (BrE) – *knock on wood* (AmE)

Nevertheless, some examples of prepositional variations are also found, e.g. *on the cards* (BrE) – *in the cards* (AmE). Moreover, there are cases where the lexical variations are important although the idioms have similar meanings, usages and the original metaphor is
preserved, e.g. *a storm in a teacup* (BrE) – *a tempest in a teapot* (AmE). Moon (1998:135) also notes that there are some idioms that have spelling variations reflecting “historical or etymological developments”, e.g. *rack and ruin* (BrE) – *wrack and ruin* (AmE), *the spitting image of X* (BrE) – *the spit and image of X* (AmE).

Moon (1998:134) states that the British English idioms are more and more influenced by the American culture and media, consequently the American variations are becoming customary in British English. People adopt these expressions and they become standardized over time. Such a parallel may be drawn between English idioms and idioms in other languages; comparing them may reveal a tendency to adopt English idioms by simply translating them as, for example, in the case of some English and Swedish animal idioms (see 4.1).

### 2.3 Literal and figurative meanings

As previously discussed, idioms are generally formed by combining words, whose meaning may differ perceptibly from the meanings of the individual words in the idiom. The level of literalness of idioms varies, which can create difficulties for language learners to understand an idiom.

Although scholars disagree on the definition of idioms, they seem to agree that translating an idiom literally can be misleading and that one should look at its etymology or cultural value. In effect, many idioms have a historical background that can explain their origin and use. As shown in Flavell & Flavell’s *Dictionary of Idioms and their Origins* (2001) it is indeed easier to understand the metaphorical meaning of an idiom if one knows how it developed in the first place.

#### 2.3.1 Metaphors and related figures of speech

For King (1999: xi) many idioms that are difficult to understand can be clarified and understood as metaphors, although not all idioms are metaphors. A metaphor is a figure of speech, used in an imaginative way to describe the relation of similarity between groups of words and used to make a description more powerful. The *Wikipedia Encyclopedia*¹ gives the following definition of a metaphor:

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“[It is a] direct comparison between two seemingly unrelated subjects. In a metaphor, a first object is described as being a second object. Through this description it is implied that the first object has some of the qualities of the second. In this way, the first object can be economically described because implicit and explicit attributes from the second object can be used to fill in the description of the first.”

By using metaphors, an abstract domain is rendered more concrete as, for example, intangible emotions are made tangible, as in as sea of trouble. The semantic contents of words are widened by metaphors, since the meaning of a metaphorical utterance differs from what is said.

According to Kövecses (2002:200) idioms are traditionally viewed as being independent of each other and not conceptual. He adds that it is also believed that idiomatic expressions are created by combining individual words, and that idioms are not really related. As opposed to this, he (2002:201) suggests that the majority of idioms are “conceptual, and not linguistic, in nature”, meaning that underlying metaphors motivate these expressions. Perceiving this can help learners make sense of the meanings of idioms. Moreover, Kövecses (2002:202) explains that conceptual domains can be used to understand abstract concepts, for example in the expression the fire between them finally went out, the underlying conceptual metaphor is LOVE IS FIRE. In this example, the love these people had has ceased to exist and the concept of “a fire going out” is used to represent this. Examples of other idioms that can be categorised under the underlying conceptual metaphor LOVE IS FIRE are: I am burning with love; she carries a torch for him (Kövecses, 2002:203). Finally, Kövecses (2002:200-206) states that being aware that many idioms are conceptually motivated can help in the teaching of English idioms. When idioms are not presented as a list of expressions independent of each other, but as expressions that may be grouped under a same concept, students may find it easier to memorize them, especially if they are semi-transparent or pure.

A figure of speech found in many idioms is the subcategory of metaphor called ‘simile’, whereby a person or a thing is compared to something else using the conjunctions like or as, e.g. He is (as) white as a sheet. According to Moon (1996:150-152), the function of similes is to compare, emphasize or intensify. The most common pattern of similes is the pattern: (as) + Adj + as + NP (e.g. as good as gold, quick as a flash), followed by the pattern V + like + NP (e.g. built like a tank, work like a dog) where ‘like’ is used similarly to ‘as’. Most similes are entirely transparent and therefore easily understood. When comparing metaphors with similes,
one can say that with metaphors the linking is implicit, e.g. *You are my rose*, while with
similes the linking is explicit, e.g. “*My Luv’s like a red, red rose*” (from the poem *My Luv’s
like a red, red rose* by Robert Burns, Scottish poet (1759-1796)).

Personification, by contrast, involves attributing human qualities and characteristics to
inanimate objects. Moon (1996: 195-197) states that idioms involving personifications (e.g. *in
the teeth of the wind, time flies*) are often determined by culture. On a similar note, she adds
that metaphors referring to animals are common, especially when the process of “denoting
and connoting supposed characteristics or qualities which are then applied to people
and human situations” is used, e.g. *a snake in the grass* (connoting deceitfulness, despicability).
Often most of the traits portrayed are negative and undesirable human qualities, and the
animals used in the idioms are often representatives of animals which are considered
repulsive, like the rat, pig or snake, or which people fear, like the snake, tiger or wolf (see 4.2.4).

2.3.2 The issues of literal translation

Culturally speaking, it is important to acknowledge the fact that some idioms that have a
specific meaning in the English culture may be misunderstood in another. Wikberg
(2004:261) points out that there are “well-recognized problems” with idioms when translating
them, especially with those referring to cultural concepts.

Sköldberg (2004:8) refers to Niemi (2002:21-35) and the results of her study of 228 Swedish
verb phrase idioms. Niemi claims that most Swedish idioms have a metaphorical meaning and
that a majority of them are associated with human activities. Hence, when translating an
idiom from English into another language, one should be aware of its implications and
consequences, as some idioms may be difficult to translate literally into another language. If
one considers for example the idiom *to feel under the weather*, misinterpretations may occur
if this idiom is literally translated as ‘*att må under vädret*’. The idea of ‘feeling unwell’ is not
obvious in the literal translation. It is therefore important to examine how an idiom is used
culturally before attempting to translate it. Finding out the etymology of an idiom and seeing
it in a context may also help the language learner to understand it.
It is interesting to mention the observations made by the scholar Sadock (1998:55) regarding the translation of idioms. He states that the everyday experiences portrayed in idioms may translate easier into another language than those specific to a particular culture. For example, the idiom to leave someone in the dark meaning “without information, not knowing what is happening” will be more easily translated into a foreign language than the idiom right off the bat meaning “instantly”. The latter idiom is specific to the American culture and refers to the game of baseball where you hit a ball with a bat. When hitting the ball, it bounces off instantly. This idiom would not necessarily be easily translated into a foreign language whose culture is not familiar with baseball.

Furthermore, pure idioms do not translate easily, since their meaning is not always obvious. The context in which an idiom is used can help the reader to find the better translation for it into another language (see 2.3.3). Wikberg (2004:261) adds that the corresponding expression in the target language will often be semantically similar to the English one, once translated. However, sometimes the words or even the wording used in the target language may be quite different, as for example in the English idiom I smell a rat, whose corresponding expression in Swedish refers to the location of a dog’s grave (i.e. här ligger en hund begraven). In this example the English and the Swedish idioms are nonetheless semantically similar as they both refer to the suspicion that ‘something is wrong’. Since there can be misunderstandings, word-for-word translation from English into another language should be undertaken carefully. One should instead focus on finding the equivalent of the idiom in the foreign language.

2.3.3 The role of context

Another way of deciphering idioms is by looking at how they are used and in what context. McCarthy and O’Dell (2003:6) explain that context also plays an important role in determining whether an idiom has a literal meaning or not, as in the example: “Tom told me to break a leg as I was going to sit my final exams.” Here the context of the examination helps determine that the idiom is not used literally. Sköldberg (2004:308) states that: “[…] The full meaning of most of the idioms does not emerge until they are put in context.” Moreover, although knowing the origin of an idiom and its cultural value certainly help us to understand why it is used a certain way, the connection between the literal meaning of the words used in an idiom and the development of its metaphorical meaning cannot always be
traced back in time. In such a case, the context in which an idiom is used can often help determine what it means.

2.3.4 Equivalency – non-equivalency between languages

An English idiom may not always have an equivalent in another language. However, when one exists, the idiom may only be a word-for-word translation, e.g. *Now cracks a noble heart* – *Där brast ett ädelt hjärta.* By looking at the etymology of an idiom, we can often determine whether the equivalent is a word-for-word translation or not. In the example cited, the English idiom can be traced back to Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet* (Svartvik & Svartvik 2003: 133). The Swedish equivalent may therefore be a literal translation of the English idiom. However, as discussed earlier, word-for-word translation may have repercussions, since the references to humour, cultural values or day-to-day events may be missed if the metaphorical meaning is lost in translation (McCarthy 1992:64).

McCarthy further states that belonging to a certain group, community or nation entails sharing similar linguistic expressions, which are widely understood. However, unless the equivalent idiom in the foreign language has the same metaphorical meaning, the learner may not always grasp what it implies.

Finally, according to O’Donnell (1990:519), in foreign idioms that have close equivalents in English, one element in them is often different and the choice of using another is “culture-specific”. O’Donnell gives as an example the idiom *like a bull in a China shop* and says that the choice of using a bull is culture-specific as in the French equivalent an elephant is used instead. He adds that it is not always certain that when recognizing an idiom in English, the foreign learner may truly understand it or use it in the proper way. Hence, spending time comparing the “culture-specific” elements of the idioms in both languages can help learners.

3. Method

The first step in this study was to find English and Swedish animal idioms for the investigation, a list of which can be found in the appendix. For English idioms, a number of reference books were consulted (Collis, Curry, Flavell & Flavell, Francis, King, Longman, McCarthy and O’Dell, Olsson, Svartvik & Svartvik); the two principal sources used were: *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* and *English Idioms.* (In the following text the *Oxford*
Advanced Learner’s Dictionary will be referred to as OALD and English Idioms as EI.) I selected these books because they contained a large number of animal idioms. A few native speakers of English also contributed with examples of animal idioms. The Swedish equivalent for each English animal idiom was found by consulting Målande uttryck – En liten bok med svenska idiom and Bonniers Svenska Ordbok, and by asking Swedish natives. (In the following text Målande uttryck will be referred to as MU). The Internet\(^2\) was also used as a source of data.

The animal idioms were selected according to three criteria: a) that each animal idiom could be found in at least two of the reference books used, showing that they are fairly common in English, b) that an equivalent idiom could be found in Swedish, and c) that the idioms selected displayed a variety of animals.

The next step in this study was to compare the English and Swedish animal idioms found. One aim was to determine whether the Swedish equivalent of the English animal idiom found always contained an animal and if that animal was the same in both languages. To do so, the English and Swedish animal idioms were categorised accordingly. The presence of an animal in the Swedish idiom and the type of animal used established how they were grouped. Furthermore, this categorisation helped demonstrate whether there are Swedish animal idioms, which do not have an equivalent in English containing an animal.

Finally, I compared the structure and wording of animal idioms in both English and Swedish to see if they were similar. The semantics and metaphorical meaning of the animal idioms were also analysed. I also looked at how they were used in both cultures and whether they had different possible varieties, such as using different animals within the same idiom in each respective language. For each category, I used some representative examples of English and Swedish animal idioms.

### 4. Results and Analysis

This section is divided into two parts. In the first study, I categorise the English and Swedish animal idioms, while in the second, I analyse and compare the content, structure, wording,

semantics and metaphorical meaning of the animal idioms. This is a qualitative study and therefore contains some speculation.

4.1 Animal variations in English and Swedish animal idioms

Since one aim of this study is to determine if the Swedish equivalent of the English idiom found always contains an animal, the Swedish idiom corresponding to each English animal idiom was examined. After having considered each idiom, a decision was made to group them into three categories:

1) Idioms with the same animal in English and Swedish
2) Idioms with a different animal in Swedish and English
3) Idioms with an animal in English but not in Swedish

A fourth category was later added: 4) Idioms with an animal in Swedish but not in English (this category will be discussed a bit later).

The purpose was to see more easily if it is common to have a Swedish animal idiom and whether the animal used is the same as in English. From the list of idioms collected, it was apparent that half of the animal idioms found fit into the first category (1). Two examples are: to be the black sheep (of the family) – att vara det svarta fåret (i familjen) and like a donkey between two bundles of hay - som en åsna mellan två hötappar. However, the English and Swedish animal idioms do not always necessarily have the same wording or structure. (This will be discussed in 4.2).

The second category (2) contains examples of animal idioms found in both languages, but which have different animals, such as, for example, to look like a drowned rat – att vara dränkt som en katt and to be/act as a guinea-pig – att vara en försökskanin. It is interesting to note in this category that several idioms in Swedish contain the same animal such as the dog må som en hund (as sick as a parrot), här ligger en hund begraven (I smell a rat), att vara en fyllehund (to drink like a fish), or the bear väck inte den björn som sover (let sleeping dogs lie), sälja skinnet innan björnen är skjuten (don’t count your chicken before they’re hatched). In English the same five idioms display five different animals (parrot, rat, fish, dog and chicken).
It is interesting to observe that many Swedish idioms contain wild animals such as the bear, wolf, owl, fox, frog, hare, etc., animals frequently encountered in the wild in Sweden. In comparison, most of the wild animals used in English are not found in all the English-speaking countries in the world; for example, bears are not encountered in the wild in England or Australia, nor are crocodiles found in the Irish countryside. A possible explanation as to why many Swedish animal idioms contain the same animal may be that since Sweden is the only country where Swedish is spoken and since Sweden does not have a notable imperialistic history, it stands to reason that many animal idioms are based on animals found there.

Similarly, there are Swedish animal idioms, which contain wild animals like the crocodile (att gråta krokodilårar) or the elephant (som en elefant i en porslinsbutik) that are not native animals. One explanation may be that these idioms may have been translated from the English equivalent or from another foreign language and are now used in Swedish. Another possible explanation is that of Flavell & Flavell (2001:63-64) who refer to the etymology of certain idioms such as to shed crocodile tears. According to Flavell & Flavell, this idiom “is used figuratively to refer to a show of false emotion in both Greek and Latin”. By studying the etymology of animal idioms, one can better understand why they exist and how to use them (see 2.3). Nevertheless, Flavell & Flavell (2001:8) state that tracing the origin of idioms is not always easy. The origin of the well-known animal idiom to keep the wolf from the door is interesting to mention in this respect. The “wolf” here symbolises hunger. Flavell & Flavell (2001:204) explain that “since ancient times, the wolf has been a symbol of poverty and want.” Fables often depict the wolf as being very hungry and on the lookout for food, so preventing the wolf from reaching the door means ‘keeping hunger and starvation at bay’, which is not always easy when in dire straits. Another interesting “wolf” idiom with the same origin is to wolf down one’s food which refers to the action of eating ravenously.

The broader variety of animals used in English often appear to reflect the diverse natural environments in which English speaking peoples live (see 2.3.4). There are several English animal idioms containing for example a turkey (to talk turkey\(^3\), to be a turkey\(^4\)), most of which

\(^3\) to talk turkey (1824) is supposedly from an elaborate joke about a swindled Indian and nowadays meaning “to talk straight/honestly”. [http://www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com). Retrieved 10 December 2005.

\(^4\) to be a turkey (1927) was used in show business slang, meaning “inferior show, failure”, probably from the bird’s reputation for stupidity. [http://www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com). Retrieved 10 December 2005.
are probably mostly used in the USA or Canada. Similarly, animal idioms with possums\(^5\) (*to play possum*), dingos\(^6\) (*as dry as a dead dingo’s donger*), echidnas\(^7\) (*as prickly as an echidna*), wombats\(^8\) (*as woolly as a wombat*), kangaroos\(^9\) (*one kangaroo short of a paddock; as happy as a kangaroo in a fog*) or lizards\(^10\) (*to be flat out like a lizard drinking*) are used predominantly in Australia. In Swedish, animal idioms with turkeys, possums, dingos, echidnas, wombats and kangaroos do not occur most likely since they are not found among the Swedish fauna. However, this does not necessarily mean that an equivalent does not exist. In such a case, the equivalent often has the same metaphorical meaning as in *to play possum*, which means “to play dead” and whose Swedish equivalent is *att sova räv* ‘to sleep fox’.

Another example is *as proud as a peacock*, which means “to be very proud” and whose Swedish equivalent is *stolt som en tupp* ‘as proud as a rooster’. If no Swedish equivalent exists, it is important to try to understand the cultural concept when translating it literally, so that the metaphorical meaning is not lost. Further observations on the use of metaphors and the issues of literal translation will be presented in 4.2.4, 4.2.5 respectively.

Other animals that Swedes seem as keen as English-speaking people to use in their idioms are domesticated animals such as dogs, cats, chickens, horses, pigs, sheep, etc. Thus we find *to count sheep* – *räkna får*; *all cats are grey in the dark* – *I mörkret är alla katter grå*, as strong as a horse – *stark som en häst*. Even when the animal is different in English and Swedish (see category (2)), some of the idioms have domesticated animals in both languages: *I smell a rat* – *det osar katt*; *when the cat’s away the mice will play* – *när katten är borta dansar råttorna på bordet*. However, in many idioms where the animal is different in both languages, only one of the animals may be domesticated: *as blind as a bat* – *blind som en nyfödd kattunge*.

\(^5\) *to play possum* – the word ‘possum’ comes from ‘*opossum*’ and has its origin in the North American Indian language Algonquian, the idiom meaning ‘to pretend to be sleeping/dead’. Source: Michael Wherrity.


\(^9\) kangaroo (1770) – this word probably comes from Aboriginal Australian ‘*gaNurru*’, the first idiom meaning ‘to be a silly person’; the second idiom meaning ‘to be very miserable’. [http://www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com). Retrieved 10 December 2005.

\(^10\) The idiom refers to ‘a person who works really hard/has a lot to do’.
The third category (3) contains examples of English animal idioms whose Swedish equivalent does not have an animal. When researching, I noticed that English animal idioms are in abundance compared to Swedish animal idioms. There are numerous English animal idioms which do not seem to have an equivalent in Swedish, as for example *all geese are swans* meaning “to constantly exaggerate the importance of a person or thing” or *to wait till the cows come home* meaning “to wait for a long time (referring to something that is never likely to happen)”. Additional examples of such idioms are not included in this study. As observed earlier, it will be easier for a foreign language learner to understand what an idiom means if it is exists in his native language. If it is not the case, then seeing the context in which an idiom is used can help the learner to grasp the meaning of an idiom. The role of context will be further discussed in 4.2.6.

Finally, I came across a small number of Swedish animal idioms without an equivalent animal idiom in English, which I thought was worth mentioning in this study; thus, a fourth category (4) was created (see Appendix). The meaning conveyed by the English and Swedish idioms in this category is similar, although no animal is used in the English idioms. The Swedish animals display a variety of both wild and domesticated animals: salmon, dogs, frogs, hare, birds, etc. An example is the English idiom *not a soul was there* which corresponds to the Swedish animal idiom *inte en katt var där*. Here, it is particularly interesting to further compare these equivalent idioms. In the Swedish version, the word “cat” represents human beings, in the English, the spiritual part of a person (“soul”) is mentioned. Surprisingly enough, it seems that over time the literal translation of the English idiom has been adopted in Swedish. Consequently, there are two Swedish versions of the same English idiom: *inte en katt/själ var där*. This certainly helps Swedish students to understand this English idiom more easily.

### 4.2 Analysis and comparison of the content, structure, wording, semantics and metaphorical meaning of English and Swedish animal idioms

This section of the study presents a comparative analysis of the lexicon and structure of the English and Swedish animal idioms as well as an examination of the role of metaphor. Furthermore, an analysis of the issues of literal translation and the role of context is also presented. Under each heading, I will provide a few examples that should explain what the
category aims at demonstrating. Reference will be made to the research done on idioms, which was presented in the background section of this paper.

4.2.1 Lexical and syntactic variations

Different types of animal idioms are found in both English and Swedish; they vary in size, form and structure. The Swedish animal idioms that correspond to the English animal idioms have, for the most part, the same structures, i.e. corresponding noun phrases, adjective phrases, prepositional phrases and verb phrases are often found in both languages. Similes (see 4.2.4) and whole sentences are also used in English and Swedish.

Examples of noun phrases (hereafter ‘NP’)

- a piggy bank  
  en spargris
- a flea-market  
  en loppmarknad

Examples of a prepositional phrase (hereafter ‘PrepP’)

- at snail pace  
  med snigelfart

Examples of verb phrases (hereafter ‘VP’)

- to cast pearls before swine  
  att kasta pärlor till svinen
- to kill two birds with one stone  
  att slå två flugor i en småll

Examples of whole sentences (hereafter ‘w.s.’)

- You can’t teach an old dog new tricks  
  Det är inte lätt att lära gamla hundar att sitta
- A live dog is better than a dead lion  
  Bättre en levande hund än ett dött lejon

Even when there is no animal in one or the other idiom, the structures are similar, for example:

- to make matters worse (VP)  
  att lägga lök på laxen (VP)
- a copycat (NP)  
  en efterapare (NP)
- it is the straw that broke the camel’s back (w.s.)  
  det är droppen som får bägaren att rinna över (w.s.)
- at the crack of dawn (PrepP)  
  i svinottan (PrepP)

There are a few exceptions, e.g. a close-call (NP) – nära skjuter ingen hare (VP).

Some animal idioms have exactly the same wording/word order: frog in the throat – tupp i halsen; to count sheep – räkna får, some vary slightly: to have ants in one’s pants – att ha myror i baken;brallorna, while others are very different: I smell a rat – här ligger en hund begraven; birds of a feather flock together – lika barn leka bäst.
Fernando (1996:34) acknowledges that the most common pattern of idioms is the semi-clausal pattern $V+\text{Det}+N$. This pattern appears to be widespread among English and Swedish animal idioms, e.g. to be the black sheep (of the family) – att vara det svarta fåret (i familjen); to buy a pig in a poke – att köpa grisen i säcken. However, the patterns $(\text{Adv})+\text{Adj}+\text{Adv}+\text{Det}+N$ and $V+\text{Prep}+\text{Det}+N$ used in similes are also very common among animal idioms, e.g. as slippery as an eel – hal som en ål; to watch like a hawk – att vara som en hök.

4.2.2 Degrees of literalness

Animal idioms seem to vary in degree of literalness and in how metaphorical they are. Moon’s (1998:22-23) categorisation can be applied to English and Swedish animal idioms. Here are some examples:

**Transparent/literal idioms**
- to fight like cats and dogs att vara som hund och katt
  This transparent animal metaphor can be easily understood in both languages, as it is a non-culturally bound fact that cats and dogs do not get along and fight. People disagreeing or arguing violently are compared to them.

**Semi-transparent/semi-idioms**
- to take the bull by the horns att ta tjuren vid hornen
  These animal idioms may not always be understood and their reference to “the decision of facing a problem instead of avoiding it” (EI 198) may have to be explained.

**Opaque metaphors/pure idioms**
- a rat race ett ekorrhjul
  These animal idioms are virtually impossible to decode and interpret without the knowledge of their origin. The English idiom can be literally understood as “rats racing”, but figuratively means “the frantic, competitive struggle to be better than others” (EI 202). The Swedish idiom literally understood as “the wheel of a squirrel” has the same figurative meaning.

4.2.3 Degrees of fixity, manipulation and transformation

The fixity of idioms can vary to some extent (see 2.2.2). Lexical variations where verbs, nouns and adjectives are substituted seem to occur with English and Swedish animal idioms. As Moon (1998:123) explains, word variations of all kinds may take place as long as the original metaphor is preserved as in, for example, as quick as a rabbit/flash where the reference to “speed” is indeed preserved. Although in the animal idioms collected, noun, verb
and adjective substitutions have been noted, such alterations do not necessarily occur in the idioms of both languages. Sometimes, the English animal idiom presents variations but not the Swedish one, and vice versa: *to sing like a bird/lark/nightingale* – *att sjunga som en näktergal*. 

In some cases, there are grammatical variations between the English and Swedish animal: *to have butterflies in one’s stomach* – *att ha fjärilar i magen*; *to have ants in one’s pants* – *att ha myror i brallorna*. Here a possessive pronoun is required in English before body parts belonging to the sentence subject, whereas, in Swedish, a definite article is used.

The shortening of idioms, as described by Fernando (1996:43), can be observed in the following (non-related) English and Swedish idioms: *Don’t count your chicken (before they’re hatched)* and *Det är ingen ko på isen (så länge rumpan är kvar i land)*, as well as in the following equivalent animal idioms: *a bird in the hand (is worth two in the bush)* – *bättre en fågel i handen (än tio i skogen)*. As explained by McCarthy (1992:63), the absence of the full idiom will not prevent the native users from understanding the cultural references made, though as Fernando (1996:51) points out, for non-native speakers such omissions may hamper interpretation.

In animal idioms, the most common variations observed were those of nouns and adjectives. Some verb variations were also noted. However, the possible substitutions are not necessarily present in both the English and Swedish versions.

**Noun change**

- *as busy as a bee/beaver* 
  *flitig som ett bi/en myra*
- *all cats are grey in the dark* 
  *I mörkret/skymningen är alla katter grå (noun change in Swedish only)*

**Adjective change**

- *as sly/cunning as a fox* 
  *slug/listig som en räv*
- *to be like a bear with a sore head* 
  *arg/ilsken som ett bi (adjective change in Swedish only)*

**Verb change**

- *to have/get goose bumps* 
  *att ha/få gåshud (verb change in English only)*
- *not harm/hurt a fly* 
  *att inte kunna göra en fluga för när*
In most cases the noun changes within the same animal idioms are those of animals: as strong as a bear/ox/horse – stark som en björn/oxe/häst/tjur. All the animals used here are recognised as being "strong creatures", therefore one can be used instead of the other, without affecting the metaphorical meaning. Furthermore, synonyms can be used in noun changes: to sing like a lark/nightingale, which refers to types of birds. Examples of noun substitutions from different semantic fields were also observed: to be as quick as a rabbit/flash.

It is interesting to compare the English and Swedish languages and see how the animals used in the same idiom, as discussed in 4.1., can differ. For example, in the animal idiom bookworm - bokmal, both the English and Swedish use the same type of insect but at different stages of development, as the Swedish word “mal” means “moth” and refers to the end result of a worm’s growth.

Finally, another variation that does not seem to affect the metaphorical meaning of animal idioms in some cases is variation in noun number: a fish finger/fish fingers – en fiskpinne/fiskpinnar; a barking dog/barking dogs never bites/bite – den hunden/de hundarna som mest skäller han/de bits minst.

As Moon (1998:128) says, adjective variations are less common; however, examples of such variation are found in animal idioms, where synonyms or adjectives with a similar metaphorical meaning are used (as in the examples given earlier). Sometimes, variations are found in the English animal idiom and in its Swedish equivalent: as sly/cunning as a fox - slug/listig som en räv, and, occasionally, may occur in one language only: to fish in muddy/troubled water – att fiska i grumligt vatten. The meaning is not affected by such variations.

The use of synonyms is also prevalent in the verb changes observed in English and Swedish animal idioms (see examples above). As described by Moon (1998:124), the meaning of an idiom is in most cases barely affected by verb variation. However, sometimes the desire to show a difference in focus can be seen when comparing English and Swedish animal idioms, like in a little bird told me – en liten fågel viskade i mitt öra, where the Swedish verb describes the action of speaking as being “very quiet so others cannot hear” (i.e. to whisper), while the English verb only mentions the action of talking. Finally, another frequent verb
variation in animal idioms in both languages is that of tense: *He ate like a pig* – *Han åt som en gris.*

A prepositional variation worth mentioning is in the idioms *like a fish out of water* (EI 200) and *som en fisk i vattnet* (MU 143), which both refer to “being a fish” and “show some connection with water”. These idioms could be mistakenly viewed as being equivalents by students. However, the prepositions “out” in English and “i” ‘in’ in Swedish show the variation of focus used to emphasize what is said at the time (as discussed by Sköldberg (2004:310)). The metaphorical meanings are certainly affected as the two idioms are not related: the English idiom refers to “the feeling of being uncomfortable in unfamiliar surroundings or company” while the Swedish idiom to “the feeling of being at ease in a particular environment”. The official corresponding idioms are: *like a fish out of water* – *en fisk på torra land* ‘a fish on dry land’ and *like a duck to water* – *som en fisk i vattnet.*

Overall, most animal idioms in both English and Swedish appear to be well-fixed and are not amenable to substitution: *to shed crocodile tears* (*to shed camel/elephant/tiger tears*), unless perhaps for the purpose of comedy or satire.

### 4.2.4 Metaphors and related figures of speech

The use of metaphor appears to be common in English and Swedish animal idioms: *to have ants in one’s pants* – *att ha myror i baken/brallorna*, meaning “to be unable to stand still” (OALD 43) and *a barking dog never bites* – *den hunden som mest skäller han bits minst*, meaning “people who lose their temper and shout are often harmless and are not to be feared” (EI 200). Moreover, the mental image created is seemingly the same in both languages, if the same animal is used, e.g. *at a snail pace* – *med snigelfart*; here, both refer to “a snail’s slow movements”, while the idioms themselves are used to describe something that is done “in a slow manner”. Comparatively, the mental image may differ, if the animal is different (see Category 2 of the Appendix). If we consider for example the idiom *a frog in the throat*, its Swedish equivalent (*en tupp i halsen*) mentions “a rooster in the throat”. The mental image of a speaker will be different when using the English animal idiom than the Swedish idiom, but the metaphorical meaning of “temporarily losing control of one’s voice” (OALD 517) remains.
Although there can sometimes be variations of animals within the same idiom (see 4.2.2), the metaphorical meaning remains, as in *as strong as a bear/horse/ox – stark som en björn/häst/oxe/tjur*. The same phenomenon can be observed in both languages.

Furthermore, as discussed by Kövecses (2002:199-206), the existence of conceptual metaphors can be observed among English and Swedish animal idioms. Several of them could be grouped under the same ‘underlying conceptual metaphor’. For example, the idioms *to eat like a bird* and *to eat like a horse* could be grouped under the underlying conceptual metaphor “SIZE IS OF THE ESSENCE”. It seems that small things that people are or do are portrayed through the use of small animals such as the mouse (*as quick as a mouse*) or the bird (*to eat like a bird*), whereas larger things are symbolised by using bigger animals, such as the elephant (*to have a memory like an elephant*), this idiom meaning ‘to have a very good memory and never forget’. The same applies to the equivalent Swedish animal idioms.

The underlying conceptual metaphor “SIZE IS OF THE ESSENCE” can also be applied to the English and Swedish animal idioms that represent the “art of being discreet”. The use of small, discreet animals seems predominant and conveys quite well the idea of attending to “what is said or done in order to keep something secret or to avoid causing embarrassment” (OALD 358). Examples of such idioms are: *a little bird told me – en fågel viskade i mitt öra; as quiet as a mouse – tyst som en mus*.

Furthermore, the underlying conceptual metaphor “PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS” can be used to group many of the idioms that compare people’s behaviour to that of animals, e.g. *as busy as a bee – flitig som ett bi; to be the black sheep (of the family) – att vara det svarta fåret*. Many of these animal idioms appear to be similes.

**Personification**

Personification seems to be quite common in animal idioms, whereby the animals are given a human aspect both in English and Swedish, e.g. *to be a lone wolf/bird – att vara en ensamvarg*. In this example, the behaviour of a person “who prefers his own company or who has little social contact with others” (EI 197) is compared to that of a wolf/bird. By means of personification, the supposedly positive or negative characters/qualities (such as wisdom, strength, quickness, stubbornness, etc.) of the animals used in the idioms are suggested and
are applied to people or situations. Using personifications is a way of subtly describing human
behaviours or states.

Sometimes a different animal is used in English and Swedish to personify a person’s
behaviour, but the metaphorical meaning remains, as in to be an eager beaver – att vara en
(ARBETS)MYRA ‘to be an ant’, both meaning to “work hard”. Moreover, personifications of
animals can be found in some cases in only one language: compare to be dog-tired – att vara
dödstrött and to be a nasty piece of work - att vara en ful fisk ‘to be a nasty fish’.

Furthermore, the personification of animals can be sometimes interpreted both in a positive
and negative way as in the idiom to have a memory like an elephant – att ha en hästminne.
Elephants and horses are believed to have an excellent memory. Their large capacity of
memory can be considered as being a positive feature, but it can also be negative as it also
means that a person never forgets, when one wishes they would.

Finally, an interesting case of personification occurs in the Swedish animal idioms en
vargavinter (i.e. a harsh winter) and vargatider (i.e. hard times), where the qualities of the
wolf have been used to personify “harshness”.

Similes

As indicated above, the use of similes appears to be quite common among animal idioms in
both English and Swedish. The construction is the same: (as)+Adj+as+NP or V+like+NP in
English and Adj+som+NP or V+som+NP in Swedish, e.g. as wise as an owl – vis som en
uggla; to eat like a bird – att äta som en fågel. In most cases where a simile is used in an
English animal idiom, one is also used in the Swedish equivalent, and vice versa, e.g. as
happy as a lark – glad som en lärka. However, when the equivalent in either language does
not have an animal, there may not necessarily be a simile in both languages, e.g. to sweat like
a pig – att bada i svett; to rain cats and dogs – stå som spö i backen.

According to Moon (1996:150-152), most similes are transparent, which facilitates their being
understood. This appears indeed to be the case with both English and Swedish animal idioms,
e.g. as lazy as a pig – lat som ett svin. However, sometimes similes may seem to have
possible interchangeable animals, when in fact the metaphorical meaning is quite different, as
for example in the idiom to eat like... - äta som...:
• **to eat like a pig** att äta som en gris  
  meaning ‘to eat noisily, in an unsatisfactory manner and to eat too much’
• **to eat like a bird** att äta som en fågel  
  meaning ‘to have little appetite and to eat small quantities’
• **to eat like a horse** att äta som en häst  
  meaning ‘to have a healthy appetite and to eat large quantities’

The characteristics of each animal are considered in these examples and are used to portray different ways of eating. Because of its size, a bird will usually eat less than a horse, while a pig often seems to be considered as a filthy and noisy eater.

### 4.2.5 The issues of literal translation

The implications of translating animal idioms literally become apparent when the animal is different in both languages (see Category 2 in the Appendix). They become even more apparent when the idiom in English or Swedish does not have an animal (see categories 3 and 4 in the appendix). In the latter categories, misinterpretations and misunderstandings may occur when English and Swedish animal idioms are translated literally.

Literal translation is relatively safe when an animal idiom is transparent and even more so when the same wording and the same animal are used in both English and Swedish: *to back the wrong horse* – *att satsa på fel häst*; *as happy as a lark* – *glad som en lärka*. Even when the wording is similar but the animal is different, literal translation seems to work rather well, as in, e.g., *poor as a church mouse* – *fattig som en kyrkråta* ‘a church rat’. Here comprehension of the metaphorical meaning is not hampered.

Moreover, in animal idioms where the wording in English and Swedish is slightly different but the idioms are semi-transparent, literal translation seems to work reasonably well, as in, e.g., *let sleeping dogs lie* – *väck inte den björn som sover* (English literal translation: “don’t wake the sleeping bear up”). Here in Swedish the idea of “letting someone sleep” is kept, as is the idiomatic meaning of “not interfering with something that is satisfactory”.

However, when no animal is used in one or the other idiom, literal translation may cause problems as the idioms are not semantically similar, as in the semi-transparent idioms *to put your foot in it* – *att göra en groda* ‘to make a frog’. Although both these idioms refer to the idea of “saying or doing something foolish, embarrassing, etc.” (EI 221), it is not apparent when translating them from English to Swedish or Swedish to English. Another example is
the idiom *to beat around the bush* whose Swedish equivalent contains a cat: *att gå som en katt kring het gröt* ‘to walk like a cat around hot porridge’. It is not immediately obvious that both idioms refer to the idea of “talking about something for a long time without coming to the main point” (OALD 95).

Another example, this time using a pure idiom, illustrates here the difficulty in understanding an idiom when literal translation is used. The Swedish equivalent of the English idiom *That’s another kettle of fish* is: *Det är en annan femma* whose literal translation would be “It’s another fiver”. The reference of both idioms to “a completely different situation or person from the one previously mentioned” (OALD 348) can be quite hard to guess from the literal translation.

Furthermore, as discussed in 2.3.2, cultural specific idioms can be hard to translate literally and may be misunderstood. The idiom *a close-call – nära skjuter ingen hare* is an interesting example of how it is sometimes easier to understand what an idiom refers to when translating from English to Swedish than from Swedish to English. In effect, this idiom is quite specific to the Swedish culture, showing the locals’ close relationship to nature. Many Swedes are indeed keen hunters, hence the reference to “the shooting of a rabbit at close range”. As Sadock (1998:55) explains, the idioms specific to a particular culture compared to those of everyday experiences portrayed in idioms may not translate as easily into English for example.

Finally, by looking at the etymology of an animal idiom, its origin can sometimes explain why a Swedish animal idiom seems so similar to the English equivalent. Literal translation may have once been applied and the consequence has been that the English animal idiom has been adopted in Swedish, e.g. *to have ants in one’s pants – att ha myror i baken/brallorna*. According to Svartvik & Svartvik (2003:20), this Swedish idiom derives from American English.

### 4.2.6 The role of context

The role of context is important for the understanding of what an animal idiom refers to. When seen or heard out of context, some animal idioms may be difficult to grasp for a language learner, but even for a native who may never have heard the idiom used before, e.g.
to cast pearls before swine – att kasta pärlor till svinen. This struggle for understanding can be especially hard if the animal in the English and Swedish idioms is different, as any similarity to the language of origin is then non-existent: *I smell a rat – att ana ugglor i mossen* ‘to suspect owls in the moss’; *a rat race – ett ekorrhjul* ‘the wheel of a squirrel’.

Moreover, it appears that the purer the metaphor is in the animal idiom, the harder it is to understand what is meant if it is presented out of context: *let sleeping dogs lie – väck inte den björn som sover*. The same phenomenon appears to take place in both languages.

5. Summary and conclusion

Idiomatic expressions give both life and richness to the English and Swedish languages and learning them is an important part of the mastery of those languages. Non-native speakers of English may feel comfortable using standard literary speech; however, when idiomatic expressions are used, they may feel frustrated and confused, since the true meaning of an idiom cannot always be determined by only considering the signification of the words it contains.

In this paper, my intention has been to compare English and Swedish animal idioms, and to examine how similar or different the Swedish equivalents of the selected English animal idioms collected are. One conclusion is that the equivalent may not be easily understood if it is not transparent or if it does not have the same wording or structure as the English animal idiom. However, by being aware of the possible variations found in English and Swedish animal idioms, the learning process of such idioms may be facilitated. In addition, knowing that the use of similes and personifications which is quite common with English and Swedish animal idioms can help students understand and learn them more easily.

By grouping the animal idioms into four categories, it can be seen that English- and Swedish-speaking people share similar linguistic expressions. The first category shows indeed that many English and Swedish animal idioms have the same animal and, for the most, have similar wording and structure. The second category shows that the use of different animals in English and Swedish animal idioms can be culture-related. Here the animals used in the Swedish idioms are for the most those found in the Swedish fauna, while the animals used in English often appear to reflect the diversity of natural environments of the various English-speaking countries.
Moreover, as shown in the third and fourth categories, a certain amount of English and Swedish animal idioms found have an equivalent in the other language that does not contain an animal, but whose metaphorical meaning is nonetheless maintained. Such animal idioms may be harder to recognise and understand in the foreign language, because of the absence of an animal. However, seeing such animal idioms used in a context can be of help to students, who may otherwise struggle to grasp their metaphorical meaning. Another conclusion is that literal translation should be used with care as it may create problems when the animal idioms are not transparent and semantically equivalent. To that effect, culture specific idioms can be hard to translate literally and should be presented in their context, to facilitate their understanding. Finally, the use of classification of idioms under the same underlying conceptual metaphor should be encouraged, as it seems to make their understanding easier.

In this study, a comparison between the etymology of English and Swedish animal idioms was not conducted, but it would be interesting to further investigate if the equivalent animal idioms have the same origin, and whether or not some English or Swedish animal idioms are becoming or have become obsolete.

In conclusion, considering how similar most of the English and Swedish animal idioms are, teaching them by comparing them with the equivalent in the other language and pointing out the possible variations as well as by presenting the idea of underlying conceptual metaphors should be encouraged.


References


Appendix – List of the collected English and Swedish animal idioms

1) Idioms with the same animal in English and Swedish

* as busy as a bee/beaver    flitig som ett bi/en myra
* as frightened as a rabbit  skrämd som en hare
* as lazy as a pig           lat som ett svin
* to eat like a pig          att äta som en gris
* to be a pig/swine/rat      att bete sig/att vara som ett svin
* a piggy bank               en spargris
* to cast pearls before swine att kasta pärlor till svinen
* as quiet as a mouse        tyst som en mus
* at a snail pace            med snigelfart
* to have ants in one’s pants ha myror i baken/brallorna
* to buy a pig in a poke     att köpa grisen i säcken
* to eat like a horse        att äta som en häst
* to mount the high horse    att sätta sig på sina höga hästar
* to back the wrong horse    att satsa på fel häst
* horsepower                hästkraft
* a poneytail                en hästsvans
* hungry as a horse/bear/wolf/hunter hungrig som en häst/varg
* as strong as a horse/ox/bear stark som en häst/oxe/tjur/björn
* to take the bull by the horns att ta tjuren vid hornen
* like a donkey between two bundles of hay som en åsna mellan två hötappar
* to count sheep             att räkna får
* to be the black sheep of the family att vara det svarta fåret (i familjen)
* as meek/gentle/mild as a lamb from som ett lamm
* One swallow doesn’t make a summer En svala gör ingen sommar
* to be a night owl          att vara en natthuggla
* as wise as an owl          vis som en uggl
* to watch like a hawk       att vara som en hök på någon
* to be hawk-eyed            att ha en falkblick
* to be a hawk               att vara en hök
* the ugly duckling          den fula ankungen
* a bird in the hand (is worth two in the bush) bättre en fågel i handen (än tio i skogen)
* to eat like a bird         att äta som en fågel
* to sing like a bird/lark/nightingale att sjunga som en näktergal
* to be free as a bird/air   att vara fri som en fågel
* a little bird told me      en liten fågel viskade i mitt öra
* The early bird catches the worm Den första fågeln får det första kornet
* not harm/hurt a fly/not say boo to a goose att inte kunna göra en fluga för när
* as happy as a lark         glad som en lärka
* as packed as sardines      packade som sardiner/sillar
* as slippery as an eel      hal som en ål
* to swim like a fish        att simma som en fisk
* to fish in muddy/troubled waters att fiska i grumligt vatten
* fish fingers               fiskpinnar
* like a fish out of water   som en fisk på torra land
* to be a fly on the wall    att vara en liten fluga
* to die like flies          att dö som flugor
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* All cats are grey in the dark
* When the cat’s away the mice will play
* to fight like cats and dogs
* to have butterflies in one’s stomach
* to shed/weep crocodile tears
* to have/get goose bumps
* to be quick as a rabbit/flash
* to be a lone wolf/bird
* Hunger drives the wolf out of the wood
* a wolf in sheep’s clothes
* to put one’s head into the wolf/lion’s mouth
* to beard the lion in his den
* The lion is known by its claws
* the lion’s share of something
* as sly/cunning as a fox
* to set the fox to keep the geese
* a holy cow
* a flea-market
* to dog-ear
* a live dog is better than a dead lion
* to be sick as a dog
* you can’t teach an old dog new tricks
* A barking dog never bites/
  S.o.’s bark is worse than s.o.’s bite

2) Idioms with a different animal in Swedish and English

* to have/get a frog in the throat
* When the cat’s away the mice will play
* like a scalded cat
* a cat nap
* to be an eager beaver
* a book worm
* as stubborn as a mule
* to rise/be up with the lark
* let sleeping dogs lie
* like a bull in a China shop
* as proud as a peacock
* to play possum
* Don’t kill the goose that lays the golden
  eggs
* as sick as a parrot
* Don’t count your chicken (before they’re
  hatched)
* to kill two birds with one stone
* It’s like water off a duck’s back
* like a dying duck in a thunderstorm

I mörkret/skymningen är alla katter grå
När katten är borta dansar råttorna på bordet.
att vara som hund och katt
att ha fjärilar i magen
att gråta krokodiltärar
att ha/få gäshud
att vara snabb som en hare
att vara en ensamvarg
Hunger driver vargen ur skogen
en ulv i färakläder
att sticka huvuden i lejonets gap
ge sig in i lejonkulan
På klon känner man lejonet
lejonparten av någonting
slug/listig som en räv
att sätta räven att vaka gäss
en helig ko
loppmarknad
att göra ett hundöra
bättre en levande hund än ett dött lejon
att må som en hund
det är inte lätt att lära gamla hundar
att sitta
Den hunden som mest skäller han bits minst
att ha/få en tupp i halsen
När katten är borta dansar råttorna på bordet
som en skällad ratta
en tuppplur
att vara en (arbets)myra
en bokmal
ensvis som en åsna/som synden
att stiga upp/vara uppe med tuppen/solen
väck inte den björn som sover
som en elefant i en porslinsbutik
stolt som en tupp
sova råv
Man ska inte slakta hönan som värper guldägg
må som en hund
sälja skinnet innan björnen är skjuten
att slå två flugor i en smäll
Det är som att slå/hälla vatten på en gås
som en fisk på torra land
* like a duck to water som en fisk i vattnet
* to be like a bear with a sore head arg/ilsken som ett bi
* to be/act as guinea-pig att vara en försökskanin
* as mad as a cut snake arg/ilsken som ett bi
* to have (got) a memory like an elephant att ha ett hästminne
* to look like a drowned rat att vara dränkt som en katt
* as poor as a church mouse fattig som en kyrkrätta
* to make a mountain out of a molehill göra en höna av en fjäder
* as blind as a bat blind som en nyfödd kattunge
* to drink like a fish att vara en fyllehund/att dricka som en svamp
* a bee in the bonnet att ha griller i huvudet/en fix idé
* a rat race ett ekorrhjul
* I smell a rat här ligger en hund begraven
* as mad as a cut snake arg/ilsken som ett bi
* to make a mountain out of a molehill göra en höna av en fjäder
* as blind as a bat blind som en nyfödd kattunge
* to drink like a fish att vara en fyllehund/att dricka som en svamp
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* I smell a rat här ligger en hund begraven
* as mad as a cut snake arg/ilsken som ett bi
* to make a mountain out of a molehill göra en höna av en fjäder
* as blind as a bat blind som en nyfödd kattunge
* to drink like a fish att vara en fyllehund/att dricka som en svamp

3) Idioms with an animal in English but not in Swedish

* to be dog-tired att vara dödstrött
* Dog eat dog Allas krig mot alla
* Every dog has his/its day Var och en får någon gång sin chans
* Has the cat got your tongue? Har du inte mål i mun?
* a copycat en efterapare
* to let the cat out of the bag tala klarspråk/ta bladet från munnen
* Curiosity killed the cat Nyfiken i en strut, öppnar man så rinner det ut
* to rain cats and dogs att regna småspik/att stå som spön i backen
* Birds of a feather flock together Lika barn leka bäst
* Your chicken have come home to roast Synden straffar sig själv
* to talk turkey gå rakt på saken
* an albatros/millstone around your neck en kvarnsten om halsen
* There are plenty more fish in the sea Mister du en, står det tusen åter
* that’s another kettle of fish det är en annan femma
* to have other/bigger fish to fry att ha viktigare saker att tänka på
* to be a cold fish att vara en kallsinning person
* a red herring ett villospår
* to have a whale of a time att roa sig kunligt
* the world is your oyster världen ligger öppen för dig
* to sweat like a pig att bada i svett
* When pigs can fly! När det blir två torsdagar i en vecka!
* a hen’s night/party en möhippa
* a stag night/party en svensexa
* to talk the hind leg of a donkey att prata som en kvarn
* It is the straw that broke the camel’s back Det är droppen som får bägaren att rinna över
* to work like a beaver att slita som ett djur
* to make a beeline for att ta raka vägen till
* to make a monkey of/fun of  
  göra narr av någon
* A leopard cannot change its spots/the tiger cannot change its stripes  
  Ränderna går aldrig ur
* to keep the wolf from the door  
  att hålla svälten borta
* You cannot run with the hare and hunt with the hounds  
  Man kan inte bära kappan på båda axlarna

4) Idioms with an animal in Swedish but not in English

* to judge a book by its cover  
  man ska inte skåda/döma en hund efter hären
* to work your fingers to the bone  
  att slita hund
* German measles  
  röda hund
* to beat around the bush  
  att gå som en katt kring het gröt
* not a soul was there/in sight  
  inte en katt/själ var där
* not to have the foggiest idea!  
  Det vete fåglarna!
* to put your foot in it/your mouth  
  att göra en groda
* a close-call  
  nära skjuter ingen hare
* to be freezing cold  
  att vara svinkallt
* at the crack of dawn  
  i svinottan
* a third-rate film  
  en kalkonfilm
* to be a nasty piece of work  
  att vara en ful fisk
* as fit as a fiddle  
  pigg som en mört
* to make matters worse  
  att lägga lök på laxen
* to have a memory like a sieve  
  att ha ett hönsminne
* to give someone food for thought  
  att sätta myror i huvudet på någon
* hard times  
  vargatider
* a harsh winter  
  en vargavinter
* No worries!  
  Det är ingen ko på isen (så länge rumpan är kvar på land)