

AN INVESTIGATION INTO SEMANTIC FEATURE OF ENGLISH SLANG CONTAINING WORDS DENOTING ANIMALS

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Abstract - Vietnamese learners of English are likely to get confused when they confront English slang - a linguistic modality confined to spoken language. They find it difficult to explain and to grasp slang as a unitary phenomenon. One difficulty that users of English face when dealing with slang that contains words denoting animals is to understand their meanings because a slang in general, as well as a slang containing words denoting animals in particular is a word or a sequence of words whose meaning can not be predicted from the meanings of the words themselves. Therefore, the purpose of this investigation is to give users of English different semantic fields when dealing with slang that contains words denoting animals. Collected from many different sources, 359 slang words and expressions containing words denoting animals are categorized and arranged into each semantic field logically.

Key words - language; slang; English users; animal; semantic field.

1. Statement of the problem

"Slang is a language which rolls up its sleeves, spits on its hands- and goes to work" Carl Sandburg quotes [12].

Slang is full of vivid reality that almost any language has, whether wanted or not. The writer Victor Hugo took notice of using slangs in his work "Le dernier Jour d'un Condamné" (1828). He even devoted his entire volume VII in the fourth section of the massive popular novel "Les Miserable" (1861) to discuss the slang. These are identified by Victor Hugo: "... All profession, all business, any random social system and all the forms of intellectual have their own slangs. On the pure literary, slang can be studied much more interestingly than other sciences".

Slang is language deliberately selected for its striking informality and is consciously used in preference to proper speech (or, more rarely, writing). It usually originates in small social group. For these groups, it is a private code that embodies their particular values and behavior and reinforces their exclusivity. As a result, understanding and using slangs correctly and effectively is not an easy task. Sometimes, non-native speakers of English find it difficult to comprehend what is meant by English slangs as well as what structures the slangs belong to. Moreover, slangs denoting animals are various in the ways of expressing their meanings because, in some cases, we cannot understand some expressions by basing on their literal meanings. As a matter of fact, you frequently hear such slang containing words denoting animals in your daily life:

- "My God, he made a real **dog's breakfast** of that presentation". [8, p.131-132]

- We ain't gonna walk no eight miles...tonight. My **dogs** are burned up. [1, p.11]

- Man, who was that **fox** I saw you with? [7, p.78]

- Hey, **monkey**. Wanna go to a house party Saturday night? [13, p.59]

- Plinio, the barman with **duck's disease** came running up. [1, p.11]

Very often we understand every individual word in this sentence but still fail to grasp what the sentence is all about. Thus, if we do not learn slang in general and slang containing words denoting animals in particular, we cannot understand their exact meanings. It means that it is so difficult for us to master true and full meanings of such phrases as **dogs, dog's breakfast, cat fight, mouse potato and bird food** if you are not under the light of slang, especially slangs containing words denoting animals. In consequence, we lose interaction in communication because we cannot understand speakers' intentions and opinions.

For the above reasons, the topic "An Investigation into Semantic Features of English Slang expressions containing Words Denoting Animals" has been chosen for this article.

2. Problem solution

2.1. Definition of slang

In Wikipedia-The Free Encyclopedia [10], slang is defined as "the use of informal words and expressions that are not considered standard in the speaker's dialect or language... It is also used to identify with one's peers". According to Yule [9, p. 211], he defines slang in his work-The Study of Language as follows "slang describes words or phrases that are used instead of more everyday terms among younger speakers and other groups with special interests".

In The Concise New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English by E. Partridge and P. Beale [5], slang is "a peculiar kind of vagabond language, always hanging on the outskirts of legitimate speech, but continually straying or forcing its way into the most respectable company". As noted by Dalzell and Victor (2008: xv), "slang is easy enough to use, but very hard to write about with the facile convincingness that a subject apparently so simple would, at first sight, seem to demand".

"Slang is a language which rolls up its sleeves, spits on its hands- and goes to work" Carl Sandburg- an American poet once described [12]. As to Chesterton G.K, he referred to slang as "the one stream of poetry which is constantly flowing" [2, p. 61].

In the definition of Online Oxford Dictionary from the website: <http://oxforddictionaries.com>, [11] slang is "a type of language consisting of words and phrases that are regarded as very informal, are more common in speech than writing, and are typically restricted to a particular context or group of people". Another definition of slang is that slang is "words or expressions that are very informal and are not considered appropriate for more formal situations. Some slang is used only by a particular group of

people” in Macmillan English Dictionary For Advanced Learners of American English [4, p.354].

2.2. Sampling

Data needed for the study are taken from various sources like books, dictionaries and web pages on the internet. The samples should include 359 English slang that contain words denoting animals.

2.3. Sample Analysis

This study was carried out with descriptive, analytical and qualitative methods.

3. Results and discussion

The implication which the English want to mention through slangs containing words denoting animals is very meaningful. In this study, the implications are discussed and analyzed in the following 12 main semantic fields and sub-fields which are based on John Ayto's classification of slang [1].

3.1. The body and its functions (48/359)

3.1.1. Parts of the body/ bodily functions. (39/48)

In this semantic field, it occupies a much more proportion than the rest. The implications of slangs show different parts of the body and its functions. For example: *dog-log*, *shoot the cat/whip the cat*, *feed the fish*, *step on a duck*, *see a man about a mule*, *drain the dragon*, *snakes*, *lay hot snakes*, *hang a rat*...

- I think I stepped in a pile of **dog-log**. Yuck!

(a section of dog feces) [7, p.61]

- You **bird-watchers** should just mind your own business! [7, p.19]

(a girl watcher, usually a man who enjoys watching women go by)

- I've been drinking too much; I have to go **drain the dragon**. (urinate) [18]

3.1.2. Illness/physique. (9/48).

Not many slangs containing words denoting animals implies illness and physique. For example: *crook as a dog*, *sick as a dog*, *goat knee*, *monkey bite*, *pig*, *whale out*, *beached whale*...

- Jodie **whaled out** when she was in college, but slimmed down when she went back to work. [17]

(gain weight usually)

- Fred: I can't come in to work today, I'm **sick as a dog**.

Jane: Too bad...have a nice trip to the beach! [16]

(trying to get out of something such as work or school)

3.2. People and society (57/359)

3.2.1. People/group (18/57)

They tell us not only about ethnic, national groups or people but also their status and relation. For example: *dog*, *be dog meat*, *lucky dog*, *mouse potato*, *sitting duck*, *fox hunter*, *turkey*, *pig Island*, *crocodile*, *bigger fish to fry*, *frog*, ...

- **Pig Island** is no place for the likes of you. [1, p.374]
(New Zealand)

- Make one move, and you're **dog meat**. [7, p.61]

(a dead person)

- The **crocodile** rows of little children [1, p.55]

(a group walking two by two in a long file)

3.2.2. Sex/sexual orientation (23/57)

Generally speaking, sex and sexual orientation are mentioned much when people in general or teens in particular use slangs: *dog style*, *pig party*, *sheep's eyes*, *birds and bees*, *fish-kiss*, *monkey spank*, *snake*, *turtle*, *pig meat*, *cat lapper*...

- He **fish-kissed** me, then ran back to his car. [7, p.74]

(to kiss someone with puckered up lips)

- He did not look like a **wolf**, but he did look like a young man with an eye for a girl. [1, p.67]

(a promiscuous man)

- He goddam tried to **snake** my old lady. [8, p.405]

(to seduce and/or have sex with)

3.2.3. Crime/prison (5/57)

Only 5 slangs that are often used by criminals show crime and prison. For example: *tiger cage*, *rabbit season*, *cat walker*, *wolf-pack*, *mule*.

- I bought from him a copula times. He was a **mule**, Dad. That means he pushed to other kids. [1, p.98]

(a smuggler)

3.2.4. Police/military/maritime/air force (11/57)

For example: *dog driver*, *bull*, *pig heaven*, *bear*, *bear in the air*, *duck*, *dragonfly*, *turkey shoot*...

- They've got a **bear in the air** on duty in northern Indiana. [7, p.14]

(a police officer in an airplane or a helicopter)

3.3. Animals (3/359)

Animal that is one of the semantic fields has the least quantity of slangs. For example: *pig-dog*, *horse hockey*, *rats with wings*.

- You don't see **horse hockey** in the streets anymore. (horse dung) [6, p.112]

3.4. Sustenance and intoxication (40/359)

3.4.1. Tobacco/alcohol/drugs (31/40)

Almost slang in this field is about tobacco, alcohol and drugs. For example: *horseshoe*, *monkey's nuts*, *dog juice*, *bite the dog*, *sheep-dip*, *drink like a fish*, *goose eye*, *monkey swill*...

- A **bee** is what he calls his habit; it's always stinging him to get a fix. (a drug addiction) [3, p.12]

- Where did you get this **monkey swill**? This would kill a monkey anyway. (strong liquor) [7, p.139]

- Ironbark went into the poison shop. Old Nick handed him a glass of **snake juice**. [1, p.144]

(poor-quality drink)

3.4.2. Eating/drinking (9/40)

For example: *street dog*, *mousetrap*, *hen-fruit*, *rabbit's food*, *pig out*, *rat's coffin*, *cat-soup*...

- Do you want some **cat-soup** on your burger?

(ketchup) [6, p.39]

- Although often dismissed as '**mousetrap**', Cheddar is much the most popular cheese in Britain. [1, p.136]

(cheese)

- You can both come back with me and eat pounds of **rabbit's food**. (salad) [1, p.136]

3.5. Articles and substances (11/359)

3.5.1. Tools/ implements/containers (4/11)

For example: dog and cat, cat pan, lion's share, monkey's island.

- Up on the **monkey's island** he had realized there would be no power for the lights. [1, p.391]

(parts of a ship)

3.5.2. Clothing/accessories (7/11)

For example: whale tail, turtles, bull and pants, duck's ass/behind, ...

- Oh, my God! Look at that butt, her **whale tail** is showing so high. [15]

(the shape formed when a g-string rides up high over a woman's trousers)

- He looked like another sub-Elvis, smooth flesh and **duck's ass** hair. (coiffure) [1, p.175]

3.6. Money, commerce and employment (29/359)

3.6.1. Money (14/29)

The examples of slangs denoting money are bad dog, fat cat, fish-skin, whale in the bay, goose and duck, elephant bucks, ...

- My client is not the kind of man to be satisfied with a mere **monkey** for his services. (£500) [8, p.295]

- In peacetime, officers in the British Army were men of independent means to whom their Army pay was **chicken-feed**. (a small amount of money) [1, p.183]

3.6.2. Work/Business/commerce (15/29)

Here are some examples: chase the dog, eat (one's) own dog food, lion, goat roper, cowboy, turkey bacon...

- She **gave him the bird** finally and for good.

(dismiss/be dismissed) [1, p.204]

3.7. Behavior, attitudes and emotions (73/359)

3.7.1. Good/positive/suitable feelings (27/73)

For example: wolf bait, silver fox, finer than frog hair, cat's ass, go on the lamb, curiosity killed the cat, pig in shit, goat heaven, hen party ...

- They were having a whale of a good time as they helped each other set up their cots. They were **horsing about**. (to enjoy oneself/have fun) [1, p.236]

3.7.2. Bad/negative/unsuitable feelings (46/73)

For example: dog's mother, pig it, dog someone around, cook one's goose, foot dragon, dog's breath, fox, cat fight, rabbit killer ...

- What's the matter, are you **chicken**? [8, p.87]

(a coward)

- If Sally insists on being a **dog's mother** on this matter, I'll tell her what I think of her. [7, p.61]

(a bitch)

- She is such a **fox**! (a sly person) [1, p.291]

3.8. Thought and communication (39/359)

3.8.1. Thought (17/39)

For example: cat off, birdbath, silly goose, mule head, chicken-head, bird-brained, mad cow, chicken oriental, have snakes in one's head, sacred cow ...

- She totally **cowed out** the day before her Chem midterm. (to lose control and go crazy) [13, p.33]

- Hadn't it been plain all along that there was a streak of madness in the old boy? ... He had done a spell in the **rat house** and was only out on sufferance. [1, p.305]

(a mental hospital)

3.8.2. Communication/education (22/39)

Just look at such some examples as dog it, frog slicing, cow college, dog on, safety monkey, bull session, goat mouth, bull butter ...

- When I tripped, my friends all **dogged on** me.

(to put down, to mock) [13, p.36]

- I'm sure they'll be saying terrible things about us, but quite frankly I couldn't give a **monkey's**. [8, p.295]

(a damn)

3.9. The arts, entertainment and the media (12/359)

3.9.1. Cards/gambling (9/12)

For example: cat's eyes, fish and chips, duck bucket, snake eyes, rabbit ears, rats and mice...

- We used to play dice with them...**Rats and mice** the game was called. (game of dice) [1, p.360]

3.9.2. Sports/performance (3/12)

Just 3 slang words are used to refer to sports and performance and they, of course, account for only 15%. For examples: *chicken run, frog show, frog salad*.

3.10. Time and temperature (4/359)

They are cold like dog nose, monkey bath, donkey's years, until the cows come home.

- It was **donkey's years** since he had been in an English train. (a very long time) [1, p.361]

3.11. Location and movement (20/359)

3.11.1. Places (6/20)

Here are some examples: dog-ear, pig's ballroom, Mickey mouse, rat-run, snake room, frog and toad.

- I'm off down the **frog and toad** for a pint of pig's.

(a road) [8, p.170]

- Drinking and curling are synonymous and many a good rink has lost a crucial Brier game or two in a hotel **snake room**. (a bar) [3, p.170]

3.11.2. Movement/vehicles (14/20)

For example: pig off, pigmobile, turn turtle, horses, panda car, mule's ear, wolf in the pack...

- Look out! Here comes the **pigmobile**. [7, p.160]

(a police car)

- How many **horses** does this thing have? [7, p.112]

(horse power as in a engine)

3.12. Abstract qualities and states (23/359)

3.12.1. Good qualities/states (6/23)

They are queen bee, donkey-click, pull a tiger, duck soup, on like Donkey Kong...

- Man! That guy really **pulled a Tiger**. [14]

(the public revelation of Tiger Woods' marital infidelities)

3.12.2. Bad qualities/states (17/23)

For example: dog-box, pig's breakfast, eat like a horse, the dog dead, work like a dog ...

- You've made a right **pig's breakfast** of that.

(a mess, a complete disaster) [8, p.334]

Table 1. Summary of semantic fields of slang containing words denoting animals

Semantic fields (359 slangs)	Quantity	Percentage
1. The body and its functions	48	13,4%
Parts of the body/ bodily functions	39	10,9%
Illness/physique	9	2,5%
2. People and society	57	15,9%
People/group	18	5,0%
Sex/sexual orientation	23	6,4%
Crime/prison	5	1,4%
Police/military/maritime/air-force	11	3,1%
3. Animals	3	0,8%
4. Sustenance and intoxication	40	11,1%
Tobacco/alcohol/drugs	31	8,6%
Eating/drinking	9	2,5%
5. Articles and substances	11	3,1%
Tools/ implements/containers	4	1,1%
Clothing/accessories	7	1,99%
6. Money, commerce and employment	29	8,1%
Money	14	3,9%
Work/Business/commerce	15	4,2%
7. Behavior, attitudes and emotions	73	20,3%
Good/positive/suitable feelings	27	7,5%
Bad/negative/unsuitable feelings	46	12,8%
8. Thought and communication	39	10,9%
Thought	17	4,7%
Communication/education	22	6,2%

9. The arts, entertainment and the media	12	3,3%
Cards/gambling	9	2,5%
Sports/performance	3	0,8%
10. Time and temperature	4	1,1%
11. Location and movement	20	5,6%
Places	6	1,7%
Movement/vehicles	14	3,9%
12. Abstract qualities and states	23	6,4%
Good qualities/states	6	1,7
Bad qualities/states	17	4,7
Total	359	100%

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, on the semantic fields, slang containing words denoting animals reflects mostly all the fields of the life. "People and society" and "behavior, attitudes and emotions" are 2 semantic fields that rank the 2 highest positions. Based on this investigation, we are able to see the whole of semantic fields of slang containing words denoting animals used in daily life.

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