

Zoo of Languages: Borrowed Animal Names in English Lexicon

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Annotation: The article delves into the fascinating phenomenon of linguistic borrowing, focusing specifically on animal names that have been adopted into the English language from various other languages. Through a historical and linguistic lens, the article explores how these borrowed terms have enriched English vocabulary, reflecting cultural exchanges and the dynamic nature of language evolution. The discussion highlights notable examples of animal names, tracing their origins, pathways into English, and their subsequent integration and usage. This exploration not only sheds light on the etymological journeys of these terms but also underscores the interconnectedness of human languages and the role of animals in cultural and linguistic identity.

Key Words: Linguistic borrowing, animal names, English lexicon, etymology, cultural exchange, language evolution, vocabulary enrichment, historical linguistics, cross-linguistic influence, language and identity.

INTRODUCTION

Borrowing words is a phenomenon deeply ingrained in the dynamics of language evolution, wherein languages absorb lexicon from other languages due to various historical, cultural, and sociopolitical factors. In linguistics, *borrowing* (also known as *lexical borrowing*) is the process by which a word from one language is adapted for use in another. The word that is borrowed is called a *borrowing*, a *borrowed word*, or a loanword.² This process is pervasive across languages worldwide and has played a crucial role in shaping linguistic diversity and enriching vocabularies. The history of borrowing words in linguistics dates back to ancient times when languages came into contact through trade, migration, conquest, and cultural exchange. The earliest documented instances of borrowing can be traced to interactions between ancient civilizations such as the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, and Mesopotamians. For example, the Greek language borrowed extensively from Egyptian and Semitic languages, while Latin, the precursor to many modern Romance languages, absorbed vocabulary from Greek and other Italic languages.

In linguistics, borrowing is defined as the incorporation of lexical items, such as words, phrases, and morphemes, from one language into another. Borrowed words can be classified into several categories based on their degree of integration and adaptation within the borrowing language:

- a) **Loanwords:** These are words borrowed from one language and used directly in another without translation or modification. Loanwords often retain their original phonological, morphological, and semantic features. For example, the English word "piano" is borrowed from Italian, while "sushi" is borrowed from Japanese.
- b) **Calques:** Also known as loan translations, calques involve the literal translation of words or phrases from one language into another. While the form may differ, the meaning remains the same. For instance, the English phrase "skyscraper" is a calque of the French term "gratte-ciel," which literally means "scrape sky."
- c) **Hybrid Words:** These are lexical items formed by combining elements from two or more languages. Hybrid words often result from language contact and are characterized by their mixed

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² <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-borrowing-language-1689176>



linguistic features. For example, "Spanglish" is a hybrid language combining Spanish and English elements.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The process of borrowing words is driven by various factors, including cultural contact, technological advancements, trade, colonization, and prestige. Some of the primary motivations for borrowing include:

- a) **Cultural Exchange:** When speakers of different languages interact, they often borrow words to express concepts, ideas, or objects that are unfamiliar or lacking in their native language. This cultural exchange enriches both languages and facilitates communication between diverse communities.
- b) **Technological Innovation:** The introduction of new technologies often leads to the adoption of specialized vocabulary from the language of origin. For example, English has borrowed numerous terms related to computers, the internet, and telecommunications from languages such as Latin, Greek, and Japanese.
- c) **Prestige and Fashion:** Languages with higher social status or cultural influence may influence other languages through borrowing. For instance, during the Middle Ages, French exerted significant influence on English vocabulary due to the Norman Conquest, leading to the adoption of French words associated with nobility, law, and cuisine.

Borrowing words is a dynamic process that contributes to language change and evolution. When a word is borrowed into a language, it may undergo phonological, morphological, or semantic adaptation to fit the phonetic and grammatical patterns of the borrowing language. Over time, borrowed words may become fully integrated into the lexicon of the borrowing language and may even undergo semantic shift or lexicalization, whereby they acquire new meanings or grammatical functions.

The phenomenon of borrowing words has significant sociolinguistic implications, as it reflects the cultural, social, and historical relationships between language communities. Borrowed words often carry connotations of prestige, identity, and power dynamics, influencing speakers' attitudes toward language variation and language use. Additionally, the borrowing of words from dominant languages may pose challenges to linguistic diversity and language endangerment, as minority languages may be marginalized or displaced by dominant languages.

The phenomenon of borrowing words is a fundamental aspect of language contact and evolution. Through borrowing, languages interact, adapt, and evolve, leading to the enrichment of linguistic diversity and the emergence of hybrid linguistic forms.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The English literary tradition, shaped by a complex interplay of cultural influences from Anglo-Saxon, Norse, French, and Latin traditions, reflects the diverse ecological landscapes, social hierarchies, and mythological beliefs of the British Isles. The zoonyms of Anglo-Saxon England were steeped in the rich tapestry of Germanic mythology, where animals played a central role as divine beings, totems, and heraldic symbols. Creatures such as the dragon, worm, and fen-wolf featured prominently in Anglo-Saxon poetry and folklore, embodying primal forces of nature and supernatural powers. In epic poems like "Beowulf," heroic warriors confront monstrous beasts in epic battles that symbolize the eternal struggle between good and evil. Medieval England was also influenced by the tradition of bestiaries, illustrated manuscripts that cataloged the natural world through allegorical descriptions of animals. Zoonyms such as the lion, unicorn, and phoenix were imbued with symbolic meanings derived from Christian theology and classical mythology. These allegorical animals became recurring motifs in medieval literature, representing moral virtues, vices, and spiritual truths in works like "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" and "The Canterbury Tales." The Norman Conquest of England in 1066 brought French language and culture to the English court, leading to the assimilation of French zoonyms into English literature. Animals such as the swan, falcon, and deer became symbols of



courtly love, chivalry, and aristocratic status in medieval romances and lyric poetry. The allegorical figure of the "wyf ofte catte" (wife or cat), for example, appears in Chaucer's "The Parliament of Fowls" as a representation of feminine wiles and domesticity. The Renaissance period witnessed a revival of classical learning and natural philosophy in England, leading to a renewed interest in zoology and animal symbolism. Writers such as William Shakespeare and Edmund Spenser drew upon classical zoonyms, such as the eagle, dolphin, and serpent, to convey political allegories, moral lessons, and psychological insights in their works. In Shakespeare's "King Lear," for instance, the imagery of the eagle and the dove symbolizes the contrasting qualities of tyranny and wisdom. The Age of Exploration brought English literature into contact with exotic animals from distant lands, sparking curiosity, wonder, and imagination. Zoonyms such as the elephant, giraffe, and kangaroo captured the imagination of English writers and artists, inspiring works of travel literature, natural history, and colonial adventure. Writers like Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift used zoonyms to depict the exotic landscapes and indigenous cultures encountered in the New World and beyond. The Victorian era witnessed a resurgence of interest in the natural world and its inhabitants, leading to the emergence of zoological literature as a distinct genre. Zoonyms such as the finch, nightingale, and skylark became symbols of romanticism, aestheticism, and ecological awareness in the poetry of John Keats, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Throughout history, languages have borrowed extensively from one another, enriching their lexicons and reflecting the complex web of human interactions with the natural world. In this comprehensive exploration, we will delve into the significance of borrowing zoonyms in language evolution, examining examples from various languages, including English, French, Arabic, Japanese, and others.

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1. Cultural Exchange and Globalization:

One of the primary reasons for borrowing zoonyms is cultural exchange and globalization. As societies come into contact through trade, migration, and colonization, they exchange not only goods and ideas but also words. Zoonyms often travel across linguistic boundaries along with cultural practices, technological innovations, and ecological knowledge. For example, the English word "kangaroo" is borrowed from the Guugu Yimithirr language of Australia, reflecting the cultural exchange between European settlers and indigenous peoples during the colonial period. Similarly, the Arabic word "giraffe" is derived from the Somali word "geri," indicating the transmission of zoonyms across Afro-Asiatic language families through trade routes and cultural diffusion.

2. Technological Innovation and Scientific Discovery:

Advancements in technology and scientific discovery often lead to the borrowing of zoonyms as new species are discovered, classified, and named. Scientists use Latin or Greek roots to coin scientific names (binomial nomenclature) for plants and animals, which are then adopted into various languages. For example, the Latin name "Canis lupus" (wolf) is borrowed into English as "canine," reflecting the scientific classification of dogs within the genus *Canis*. Similarly, the Latin name "Panthera leo" (lion) is borrowed into Japanese as "raion," reflecting the cultural diffusion of scientific terminology across linguistic boundaries. The borrowing of zoonyms in scientific contexts facilitates international collaboration and knowledge exchange, allowing scientists to communicate their findings across linguistic and cultural barriers.

3. Cultural Prestige and Literary Borrowing:

Zoonyms often carry connotations of cultural prestige and literary borrowing, particularly when they are associated with exotic or foreign species. Languages may borrow zoonyms from prestigious sources, such as classical literature, mythology, or foreign languages, to elevate their own cultural status or aesthetic appeal. For example, the English word "phoenix" is borrowed from Greek mythology, symbolizing rebirth and immortality, while the French word "éléphant" is borrowed from

³ E. Haugen, "The Analysis of Linguistic Borrowing," *Language*, vol. 2, p. 26, Linguistic Society of America, Washington, 1950.



Latin via Arabic, reflecting the historical trade routes and cultural exchanges between Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Literary borrowing of zoonyms can also serve as a form of cultural appropriation or homage, as writers draw upon the symbolic meanings and associations of animals to create allegories, metaphors, and cultural references in their works.

The historical background of English zoonym borrowing is a fascinating journey through centuries of linguistic evolution, cultural exchange, and ecological interactions. From the earliest roots of Old English to the globalized language of today, English zoonyms have been shaped by a multitude of influences, including migration, conquest, trade, scientific discovery, and literary borrowing. In this comprehensive exploration, we will trace the historical trajectory of zoonym borrowing in English, examining key examples from various linguistic sources, including Old English, Latin, French, Norse, Greek, Arabic, and indigenous languages.⁴

1. Old English Origins:

The earliest zoonyms in English can be traced back to the Germanic tribes that migrated to Britain in the early Middle Ages. Old English, the language spoken by these Anglo-Saxon settlers, was rich in animal names that reflected their agricultural lifestyle, hunting practices, and interactions with the native fauna of the British Isles. Many Old English zoonyms have survived into modern English with little alteration, serving as linguistic relics of the Anglo-Saxon era. Examples include:

- **"Cū" (cow):** Derived from the Proto-Germanic *kūz*, the Old English word "cū" referred to the domesticated bovine animal used for milk, meat, and labor. The word is cognate with other Germanic languages, such as Old Norse "kýr" and Old High German "kou," reflecting the common ancestry of these languages.⁵
- **"Wulf" (wolf):** Derived from the Proto-Germanic *wulfaz*, the Old English word "wulf" referred to the carnivorous mammal of the Canidae family. The word is cognate with other Germanic languages, such as Old Norse "úlfr" and Old High German "wolf," reflecting the widespread presence of wolves in Germanic folklore and mythology.⁶
- Latin was the language of learning and culture in medieval Europe, and many Latin zoonyms were borrowed into English to describe plants, animals, and natural phenomena. Examples include:
- **"Canis" (dog):** Borrowed from Latin, the English word "canis" refers to the domesticated mammal of the Canidae family, known for its loyalty and companionship to humans. The word is used in scientific taxonomy to denote the genus that includes dogs, wolves, and other related species.⁷
- **"Fēlēs" (cat):** Borrowed from Latin, the English word "fēlēs" refers to the domesticated mammal of the Felidae family, known for its independence and hunting prowess. The word is used in scientific taxonomy to denote the genus that includes domestic cats and other related species.⁸
- **"Equus" (horse):** Borrowed from Latin, the English word "equus" refers to the domesticated mammal of the Equidae family, known for its strength and agility. The word is used in scientific taxonomy to denote the genus that includes horses, donkeys, and zebras.⁹

2. Norman Conquest and French Borrowings:

The Norman Conquest of England in 1066 brought French-speaking nobility to the British Isles, leading to the adoption of French zoonyms into English. French was the language of the aristocracy

⁴ Baugh, John. *A History of the English Language*. Routledge, 2018.

⁵ <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/cow>

⁶ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wulf>

⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dog>

⁸ <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/feles>

⁹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Equus_\(genus\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Equus_(genus))



and the court, and many French zoonyms were borrowed into English to describe animals associated with hunting, cuisine, and heraldry. Examples include:

- **"Porc" (pig):** Borrowed from Old French, the English word "porc" refers to the domesticated mammal of the Suidae family, known for its intelligence and adaptability. The word is used in culinary contexts to denote the meat of a pig, known as "pork" in English.¹⁰
- **"Cheval" (horse):** Borrowed from Old French, the English word "cheval" refers to the domesticated mammal of the Equidae family, known for its speed and endurance. The word is used in equestrian contexts to denote horses used for riding, racing, or work.¹¹

3. Norse Influence and Scandinavian Borrowings:

The Viking invasions of England in the 8th and 9th centuries brought Norse-speaking settlers to the British Isles, leading to the adoption of Norse zoonyms into Old English. Norse was the language of the Norsemen, the seafaring warriors from Scandinavia, and many Norse zoonyms were borrowed into English to describe animals associated with seafaring, navigation, and warfare. Examples include:

- **"Hvalr" (whale):** Borrowed from Old Norse, the English word "hvalr" refers to the marine mammal of the Cetacea family, known for its massive size and aquatic habitat. The word is used in maritime contexts to denote whales, dolphins, and porpoises.¹²
- **"Úlfr" (wolf):** Borrowed from Old Norse, the English word "úlfr" refers to the carnivorous mammal of the Canidae family, known for its predatory instincts and pack behavior. The word is used in Norse mythology to denote the mythical wolf Fenrir, son of the god Loki.¹³

The Age of Exploration and Scientific Revolution in the 16th and 17th centuries brought about a wave of scientific discoveries and taxonomic classifications, leading to the borrowing of zoonyms from Latin and Greek into English. Latin and Greek were the languages of science and scholarship in early modern Europe, and many scientific terms and zoonyms were borrowed into English to describe newly discovered plants, animals, and natural phenomena.

CONCLUSION

Throughout history, languages have borrowed extensively from one another, enriching their lexicons and reflecting the complex web of human interactions with the natural world. Zoonyms, or animal names, serve as linguistic markers of cultural identity, ecological knowledge, and human imagination, embodying the deep connections between language, landscape, and biodiversity. As languages continue to evolve and adapt to changing environments, the borrowing of zoonyms will remain an important mechanism for linguistic innovation, cultural exchange, and crosscultural communication. By studying the patterns of zoonym borrowing, linguists, anthropologists, and environmentalists can gain a deeper understanding of human societies' relationship with the natural world and the importance of preserving linguistic diversity and ecological knowledge for future generations. In conclusion, the borrowing of zoonyms in English language reflects the intricate interplay of linguistic, cultural, and ecological factors that shape human societies' understanding of the natural world. From ancient myths to modern scientific discoveries, zoonyms serve as linguistic bridges that connect different cultures, languages, and ecosystems. By embracing the diversity of zoonyms and preserving the richness of linguistic heritage, we can foster greater appreciation for the beauty and complexity of the natural world and promote cultural understanding, linguistic diversity, and ecological sustainability for generations to come.

¹⁰ https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/porc#Etymology_2

¹¹ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/french-english/cheval>

¹² <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/hvalr>

¹³ <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/ulfr>



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