

Every dog has its day – A Study of Figurative Animal Expressions in
English Idiom Dictionaries

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Sivuainetutkielma, 38 sivua + liitteet (10 sivua)

Sivuainetutkielmassani tarkastelen englannin kielen idiomaattisia ilmauksia, joissa esiintyy eläimennimitys. Tällaisia eläinilmauksia ovat esimerkiksi *smell a rat* ja *kill two birds with one stone*. Tutkimuksessani määrittelen idiomit kuvaannollisiksi ilmauksiksi, jotka koostuvat useammasta kuin kahdesta sanasta ja joiden merkitystä ei voida johtaa yksittäisten osien kirjaimellisista merkityksistä. Tämä määritelmä kattaa idiomien lisäksi myös vertaukset ja sananlaskut. Tutkimukseni tarkoituksena on selvittää, mitä eläimiä ja verbejä käytetään yleisimmin englannin idiomaattisissa ilmauksissa. Tarkastelen myös leksikaalista ja rakenteellista vaihtelua sekä britti- ja amerikanenglannin välisiä eroja ja yhtäläisyyksiä eläinidiomeissa.

Aineistoni on koottu seuraavista yksi- tai kaksikielisistä idiomisanakirjoista: *Longman Idioms Dictionary* (2000), *Collins Cobuild Idioms Dictionary* (2011), *101 idiomia in English* (1998), *A bird in the hand is worth kymmenen oksalla* (2002), *Parempi pyy pivossa kuin two in the bush* (2004), *It's not my heiniä* (2006) ja *Se ei ole minun cup of tea* (2008). Tutkimusmenetelmä on pääasiassa laadullinen, sillä selitän, mitä erityyppiset idiomaattiset ilmaukset ovat ja miten ne voidaan erottaa toisistaan. Toisaalta tutkimuksessa on myös määrällisiä piirteitä, koska lasken eri eläimennimitysten ja verbien yleisyyksiä ja esitän tulokset taulukkomuodossa. Lisäksi tutkimuksen liitteenä on taulukko kaikista idiomaattisista eläinilmauksista, jotka löytyivät tutkituista sanakirjoista. Lähestymistapani tutkittavissa ilmauksissa esiintyvään vaihteluun on leksikografinen, toisin sanoen pidän saman idiomien, vertauksen tai sananlaskun vaihtoehtoisia muotoja yhtenä ilmauksena enkä sen vuoksi laske jokaista varianttia erikseen.

Tutkimukseni tulokset osoittavat, että eläimennimityksen sisältävien kuvaannollisten ilmausten tavallisimmat tyypit yleisyysjärjestyksessä ovat idiomit, vertaukset ja sananlaskut. Leksikaalinen vaihtelu on aineistossa rakenteellista variaatiota yleisempää ja erityisen tavallista se on verbilauseidiomeissa. Suurinta osa eläinidiomeista käytetään sekä britti- että amerikanenglannissa. Tutkimuksen perusteella voidaan todeta, että suosituimmat eläimennimitykset idiomaattisissa ilmauksissa ovat joko kotieläimiä (*dog, cat, horse, pig*) tai hyperonyymejä (*bird, fish*). Tavallisimmat verbit kuuluvat primäärisiin perusverbeihin (*be, have, do*) tai toimintaverbeihin (*make, go, get*).

Avainsanat: idiomaattiset ilmaukset, eläimennimitys, eläinidiomit, idiomisanakirja

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1. Introduction

The aim of my second subject thesis is to explore English idioms and similes which contain an animal constituent. Various multi-word expressions are relatively common in everyday language, although we do not often notice that we are using them. We perceive many idioms, similes and proverbs as completely natural without seeing the imaginative metaphors and linguistic inventions in them. I am interested in studying these figurative multi-word expressions because they not only contain surprising metaphors but are also relevant to foreign language competence. According to Alm-Arvius (2007, 14), “[t]he ability to use and understand idioms spontaneously and in accordance with the general language habits in a speech community is considered an important indication of proficiency in a language”. Since it is not possible to study all the idioms in the English language, I chose to investigate idiomatic expressions containing words denoting animals. As Dobrovol’skij and Piirainen (2005, 323) observe, many figurative expressions include words referring to domestic animals, wild animals, birds, fish, or insects.

Anglophone research in the area of phraseology, that is, the study of various literal and figurative multi-word lexical units, has not been as extensive as that in other areas, for instance in generative linguistics. Multi-word lexical units were considered to be marginal exceptions in the English lexicon and language and their importance was not acknowledged until the rise of corpus linguistics in English language research (Dobrovol’skij and Piirainen 2005, 32). In recent decades, there has indeed been an increased interest in investigating idioms and other multi-word expressions in English and other languages.

Despite this growing research, linguists have not reached full agreement on how to define an idiom and which expressions are to be regarded as idioms. Most researchers nevertheless accept that an idiom is a fixed, figurative multi-word expression whose meaning cannot be derived from the meanings of the single words that it contains. Although there is a general consensus on the basic definition of the term *idiom*, linguists have differing views on what to include in the category of idioms. This disagreement is partly due to the fact that idioms can be structurally very different

from each other, for instance *a dark horse*, *have ants in your pants*, *a little bird told me* (all the example idioms, similes and proverbs in this second subject thesis are taken from my idiom collection if no other source is mentioned).

In my second subject thesis, I investigate English animal idioms, similes and proverbs in English idiom dictionaries. I attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What are the characteristics of idioms and other figurative multi-word expressions, that is, similes and proverbs, and how can they be distinguished from each other?
2. Which figurative animal expressions exist in English?
3. What kind of lexical, syntactic and regional variation is attested in figurative animal expressions in idiom dictionaries?
4. Which animal constituents and which verbs are the most common in English idioms, similes and proverbs?

The theory section of my second subject thesis begins with a description of the methodology and the criteria by which I have selected the animal idioms and similes (Chapter 2). In addition, I introduce the monolingual and bilingual idiom dictionaries used in the study. Chapter 3 discusses the various definitions and characteristics of idioms and variation in idioms. I also present other types of figurative multi-word expressions, in other words, similes and proverbs and explain what differentiates them from idioms and from one another. In Chapter 4, I consider the role of animal constituents in figurative multi-word expressions. The analysis section (Chapter 5) presents the results of the idiom dictionary analysis, and finally, in Chapter 6, I draw conclusions based on the results of the analysis.

2. Data and methods

For this study, I compiled my own idiom collection which consists of all the animal idioms, similes and proverbs found in English idiom dictionaries. The method is mainly qualitative, that is to say, I explain what figurative multi-word expressions are and how they are used. The study

also employs quantitative methods because I count frequencies of the different animal constituents and verbs in the expressions and present the most frequent animals and verbs in table format. In addition, I include an appendix which contain a table of all the animal idioms, binominals, similes and proverbs which I found in the dictionaries.

The data used in this study have been collected from special idiom dictionaries instead of general dictionaries because the selection of idioms is more exhaustive in them. In addition, as Niemi (2004, 248) states, idioms which are listed in idiom dictionaries can be regarded as conventional because they have been systematically selected. I chose two relatively recent English idiom dictionaries and five quite new English-Finnish idiom dictionaries because they contain contemporary British English and American English idioms. In addition, the monolingual idiom dictionaries are based on written and spoken corpora.

2.1 The criteria for selecting the figurative animal expressions

In this second subject thesis, I define *idioms* as non-literal expressions which contain more than one word and whose meaning cannot be derived from the literal meanings of the single constituents. This definition even includes similes, binominals and proverbs. Animal idioms vary in their structure but in my investigation, the structure is less relevant and the main criterion is that the expression contains a word denoting an animal. As a result, my idiom collection includes phrases that are structurally very different. There are idioms consisting of a verb and a direct object, for instance *smell a rat* and idioms that do not contain a verb but consist of an adjective attribute, such as *a lone wolf*. In addition to these, an animal idiom can include other constituents, such as a prepositional phrase (*kill two birds with one stone*). Sometimes the animal word occurs as the head or as the modifier in a compound (*fight like Kilkenny cats; play gooseberry*¹).

Moreover, there can be lexical variation in the animal word, the verb or some other constituent (e.g. *like lambs/sheep to the slaughter; to shed/weep/cry crocodile tears; have*

¹ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (henceforth *the OED Online*), some “plants and fruit have received names associating them with animals”, although the reasons for doing this are not known.

other/bigger fish to fry). Morphological and syntactic variation occurs as well, especially in the form of variability in number, such as *fight like cat/cats and dog/dogs*. Idiom variation will be discussed in more detail in 3.1.1. My idiom data also include similes which are used with a verb, such as *work like a horse* and verbless similes, for example *as quiet as a mouse*. Binominals with or without a verb are also included (*play ducks and drakes; the birds and the bees*). Some idioms are actually shortened forms of proverbs, such as the idiom *birds of a feather* which is the truncated version of the proverb *Birds of a feather flock together* (see 3.3). This is why my idiom collection even comprises those proverbs which are found in their shortened forms in the idiom dictionaries.

In my study, I use a lexicographical approach to idiom variation, that is to say, I do not regard each variant of the same idiom, simile or proverb as an independent type and I therefore do not count each variant separately (see Moon 2008, 12). As Moon (2008, 12) states, such grouping of the different versions of the same expression “impl[ies] that there is no distinction in meaning or usage between variants”. This approach to variation is exemplified by the following expressions: *a chicken and egg situation/problem/dilemma; back/pick/bet on the wrong horse; drunk as a skunk/coot; give a dog a bad name (and hang him)*.

In this study, I exclude figurative multi-word expressions referring to an animal body part since they do not refer directly to the animal itself, for instance *try your wings* or *You could have knocked me down with a feather*. In some cases, it is difficult to decide whether the idiom relates to an animal or a human body part (*jump out of your skin; keep an eye on something*), and expressions of this type are thus excluded. Besides these cases, I leave out phrases which express something related to animals, such as animal products (*it's no use crying over spilt milk; put all your eggs in one basket; pull the wool over someone's eyes*). In addition, I exclude idioms in which an animal constituent (e.g. *fish* or *fly*) is used either as a verb or as a noun not referring to the animal in question, as in the following idioms: *fish or cut bait; fish in troubled waters; a fishing expedition; fly off the handle; let fly²; on*

² The *OED Online* lists the expression *let fly* (verb) under the headword *fly* (verb 1) and mentions that it can be used figuratively but does not explain the meaning of this figurative sense.

*the fly*³.

2.2 Idiom dictionaries

In my analysis, I use two monolingual idiom dictionaries and five English-Finnish idiom dictionaries or books. The monolingual dictionaries I chose are *Longman Idioms Dictionary* (2000) (hereafter *LID*) and *Collins Cobuild Idioms Dictionary* (2011) (*CCID*). *LID* includes more than 6000 most frequently used idioms from spoken and written English covering both American and British English. It presents facts about the origins of idioms and information on how and when to use them accompanied by examples of the actual use from the Longman Corpus Network and the Internet. *CCID* is a frequency-based idiom dictionary which contains over 3000 current British and American English idioms. It offers additional information on the frequency, contexts, meanings and usage of the idioms including examples from the Bank of English.

Bilingual idiom dictionaries and books were a starting point for my investigation for practical reasons. It was difficult to find current monolingual idiom dictionaries in the libraries in Tampere. Only later did I obtain the monolingual idiom dictionaries mentioned earlier. The bilingual idiom dictionaries I studied are *101 idiomia in English* (1998) (*REK*), *A bird in the hand is worth kymmenen oksalla* (2002) (*WE1*), *Parempi pyy pivossa kuin two in the bush* (2004) (*WE2*), *It's not my heiniä* (2006) (*WE3*) and *Se ei ole minun cup of tea* (2008) (*WE4*). *REK* offers equivalent Finnish idioms or Finnish explanations for 101 English idioms. This dictionary contains an illustration for many of the idioms but it does not have any example sentences or information on the usage of these expressions. The last four idiom books (*WE1-WE4*) are written by the same authors, Westlake and Pitkänen, and they form a series in which each book contains 50 English idioms and their Finnish equivalents. In these books, each English and Finnish expression is illustrated but what is lacking is example sentences and information on how the phrases can be used.

³ According to the *OED Online*, the idiom *on the fly* means '(originally) on the wing, flying; (hence) in motion, moving up and down', and the noun *fly* in this expression refers to the action of flying, not to the flying insect.

3. Idioms and other figurative multi-word expressions

In this chapter, I will define and discuss idioms, binominals, similes and proverbs and consider their characteristics. I will also look at different types of variation attested in idioms. There are both differences and similarities between the various types of figurative multi-word expressions.

However, these distinctions are not clear-cut but rather they form a continuum (Moon 1998, 22; Mäntylä 2004, 49).

In this study, I will use the umbrella term *figurative multi-word expressions* which covers idioms, binominals, similes and proverbs. I chose this particular term because it emphasises some of the central aspects of these expressions, namely figurativeness and multi-wordedness. Other terms which are commonly used in phraseological literature to denote multi-word expressions include *idiom*, *phraseme*, *phraseologism*, *phraseological unit*, *fixed expression*, *formulaic expression* and *multiword lexical unit* (Dobrovolskij and Piirainen 2005, 29-31; Cowie 1998, 4-7; Moon 1998, 5). Different terms are connected with various traditions in phraseological research. The Anglo-American tradition favours the term *idiom*, whereas in the Russian tradition, the terms *phraseologism* and *phraseological unit* are commonly used (Petrova 2011, 11). The term *phraseme* is often found in international phraseological research (*ibid.*).

It is important to bear in mind that besides idioms, similes and proverbs, the group of multiword expressions includes collocations, other phrases and sayings (see Figure 1 next page). In this study, I include sayings in the category of proverbs because both are figurative expressions consisting of whole clauses or sentences. As Figure 1 shows, collocations and other phrases, however, belong to the literal end of the lexicon and, for this reason, they are not included in this study, which focuses on exploring figurative multi-word expressions. Figure 1 also illustrates the vague boundaries between various figurative and literal multi-word expressions.

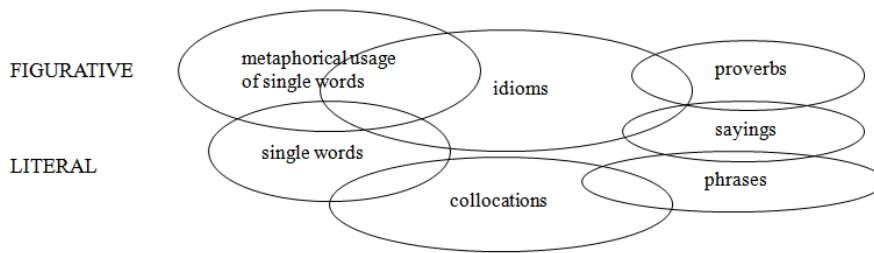


Figure 1. The rough field of vocabulary (Mäntylä 2004, 38).

3.1 Idioms

As mentioned earlier, most researchers define *an idiom* as a multi-word expression whose meaning cannot be deduced from the literal meanings of the individual words. Accordingly, an idiom constitutes an independent semantic unit whose meaning can be presented in the form of the following formula: $A + B + C = D$ (Mikone 2000, 17; Svensén 2004, 239; Häkkinen 2000, 6). Idioms are regarded as part of the lexicon but they always constitute exceptions or special cases there (Häkkinen 2000, 4-5; Mikone 2000, 17). Häkkinen (2000, 13) observes that it is unnecessary to include single words or whole sentences in the idiom category, since there are other concepts which can be used to describe and classify them, whereas there still is a grey zone between the word level and the sentence level. According to Fleischer, an idiom has to contain at least a noun, a verb or an adjective and have one of the following syntactic structures: a verbless word combination, a fixed verb phrase, or either a whole clause or a sentence (Fleischer, quoted in Ingo 2000, 33). As Ingo (2000, 34) points out, idioms can also function as sentence constituents, such as subject or object.

According to Mäntylä (2004, 28), metaphoricity is an essential characteristic of idioms.

Metaphoricity is the term for a semantic process in which the meaning of one or more words changes from literal to abstract or figurative (Clausén and Lyly 1995, 26-27). In Clausén and Lyly's (1995, 26) opinion, metaphoricity concerns the whole expression in the case of idioms. Idioms are also considered to be ambiguous, which means that they can be interpreted literally and that they also have a figurative sense which clearly differs from the literal one (Östberg 2002, 16).

Some of the idiomatic expressions are more figurative than others. Mäntylä (2004, 28) notes that researchers usually distinguish three groups of idioms according to their degree of figurativeness. The first group comprises completely *figurative* or *opaque idioms*, and this term implies that none of the words included in the idiom are used in their literal sense (Svensén 2004, 242; Lähdemäki 2000, 84). For this reason, it is impossible to understand the figurative meaning of an opaque idiom, such as *kick the bucket*, if one has not heard it before or is not familiar with its etymology (Lähdemäki 2000, 84; Mäntylä 2004, 29). The second group contains *semi-transparent idioms* (e.g. *quake in your shoes*) in which some of the words are used in their literal sense, which can help to detect the figurative meaning of the expression (Mäntylä 2004, 29; Svensén 2004, 242). The third group consists of *transparent idioms* in which there is a clear connection between the literal and the figurative sense, as in *give the green light* (Mäntylä 2004, 29). As Alm-Arvius (2007, 15-16) notes, even the semantically transparent idioms belong to the category of idioms since their constituents usually occur in a fixed order or form and they are related to certain domains or usage situations.

Some researchers in the area of phraseology are concerned with the concepts of *prototypical* and *non-prototypical idioms*. According to Häkkinen (2000, 8, 10), prototypical idioms are unpredictable, unproductive and conventional word combinations. Sköldberg (2004, 29) defines a *prototypical idiom* as an institutionalised combination of lexical units which forms a syntactic construction and functions as a part of a clause or a sentence, has a relatively fixed form and a figurative meaning which cannot be derived from the meaning of the individual words. She (2004, 26) points out that prototypical idioms do not have to possess all these features and that they can be more or less fixed, figurative, institutionalised or semantically transparent.

According to Prentice and Sköldberg (2010, 10) fixedness means that fixed multi-word expressions occur in a limited number of syntactic forms or constructions. The term *institutionalised* refers to the fact that prototypical idioms have to be recognised and accepted units or expressions in a language (Moon 1998, 7). As Sköldberg (2004, 26) emphasises, a prototypical idiom fulfils more

of these characteristics than a less prototypical idiom. She (2004, 27) further notes that some expressions, such as binominals, are not always interpreted as prototypical idioms, although they possess all the features mentioned above (see 3.1.2). On the other hand, Skog-Södersved and Malmqvist (2007, 325) maintain that it is not necessary to consider prototypical idioms or their characteristics since idioms form a continuum of fixed multi-word expressions.

In Svensén's (2004, 242) view, all idioms have originally had a literal meaning which has weakened once people have started to use the figurative sense. At the same time, the meaning of the expression has broadened (Ingo 2000, 34). The problem with interpreting the meaning of an idiom correctly often lies in the fact that an idiom can have its roots in the early history of the language and its etymology is therefore no longer known to the ordinary language user (Lähdemäki 2000, 87; Mäntylä 2004, 29). For example, the figurative sense of the idiom *kill two birds with one stone* does not concern killing these animals but managing to achieve two things at the same time (Mäntylä 2006, 153; Sinclair 2011, 29).

Lähdemäki (2000, 87) states that the context can sometimes help to interpret the meaning of an idiom. Furthermore, the meaning of several idioms is not totally arbitrary but has its origin in some real situation or action, as in the idiom *hang up one's boots* which means 'to retire from an activity, typically football or another sport' (Mäntylä, 2004, 29; Moon 1996, 248; Lähdemäki 2000, 87). There is usually an explanation for an idiom with which the idiom can be replaced without a significant change in meaning. For instance, the idiom *hang up one's boots* can be replaced with the explanation 'stop working; retire' (Ayto 2009, 164).

Idioms can nevertheless convey slight differences in meaning compared to their non-idiomatic counterparts and some idioms can thus function as a euphemism for a difficult thing or describe a simple phenomenon in a more colourful way (Mäntylä 2006, 152-153). In addition, they are used to express meanings which would be difficult and time-consuming to explain literally (Mäntylä 2006, 153). An example of such a concise idiom is *to beat about the bush* which means 'to talk about something without saying what you mean clearly and directly, even though the person you are

talking to may not like it' (Stern 2000, 47). Moreover, Svensén (2001, 242-243) states that idioms are infrequent in texts and corpora. Mäntylä (2006, 153-154, 156, 158) agrees with this view by saying that idioms are relatively rare compared to single words but argues that they are commonly used in informal speech, journalism and news. Moon (1998, 121) and Skog-Södersved and Malmqvist (2007, 323), on the other hand, consider idioms to be highly common not only in journalism but in all other text types as well.

3.1.1 Idiom variation

Although idioms have traditionally been regarded as fixed or unchangeable multi-word expressions, a number of them tolerate variation of certain constituents without a change in meaning. *Variation* can be defined as the use of different conventional versions of the same multi-word expression which can still be identified as realisations of this particular expression (Prentice and Sköldböck 2010, 10; Alm-Arvius 2007, 15). Variation can be either lexical or syntactic, and the majority of multi-word expressions allow at least some form of lexical or structural variation (Prentice and Sköldböck 2010, 10; Moon 1996, 247).

Lexical variation implies that a constituent in an idiom can be substituted for another but the meaning of the expression usually remains the same, for instance, a noun can be varied: *a can/bag of worms* or *call off the dogs/hounds*. The variable word can also be a verb, as in *have/get butterflies in your stomach* or *somebody wouldn't hurt/harm a fly*. Other less common types of lexical variation involve substituting adjectives, modifiers, prepositional or adverbial particles and conjunctions (Moon 1998, 127-130). Sometimes there is a slight change in meaning and the variant forms differ in terms of focus, degree or intentionality, as in *keep/play your cards close to your chest* or *throw/put someone off the scent* (Moon 1996, 248; Moon 1998, 125).

Moon (1996, 247-248) remarks that lexical variation in idioms often concerns different usage in British and American English, for instance *too big for your boots* (BrE) and *too big for your breeches/britches* (AmE) or *have green fingers* (BrE) and *have a green thumb* (AmE). There are

even a few synonymous British and American English idiom equivalents, such as *have one's hand/fingers in the till* (BrE) and *have one's hand in the cookie jar* (AmE) (Moon 1998, 134).

Morphological or syntactic variation involves differences in number or possession (e.g. *have an/no axe to grind*, *turn the screw(s) on someone*) or other structural transformations (e.g. *let the cat out of the bag* or *the cat is out of the bag*) (Moon 1996, 249). Other types of syntactic variation occur when the word order in an idiom is varied or different tenses are used, and according to Svensén (2004, 240), the latter is possible with the majority of idioms containing a verb. Furthermore, variation can occur when an optional constituent is included in or excluded from the idiom, which either alters or does not change the meaning of the expression: *a worm's-eye view (of something)* or *ride two horses (at the same time)*.

Occasionally, idiom variation causes a clear change in meaning, even an opposite meaning creating antonymous idioms, for instance *have a monkey on your back* and *get the monkey off your back* or *get on your high horse* and *get/come down off your high horse*. There are also idiom synonyms, in other words, figurative multi-word expressions which have a similar meaning and stylistic value, even though their main components may vary noticeably in terms of structure: *wash/air your dirty laundry/linen in public* and *do your dirty washing in public* (Moon 1996, 251-252). Sköldbberg (2004) demonstrates in her doctoral thesis that idioms differ considerably in terms of variation and that they actually constitute a continuum from totally fixed to really flexible or unstable idioms. It can therefore be argued that the stability of idioms is relative and changes with time (Mikone 2000, 18).

It is even possible to modify or manipulate idioms intentionally for various purposes and in different contexts. According to Prentice and Sköldbberg (2010, 10), *modification* of multi-word expressions can be defined as deliberate deviation from the standard or canonical form of the expression in order to create a stylistic effect. Alm-Arvius (2007, 24) observes that modifications may alter the meaning of the idiom but adds that it is nevertheless possible to recognise the original expression. Although Prentice and Sköldbberg (2010, 10) mention the stylistic effect created by idiom

modification, they conclude that if one intentionally deviates from the conventional or canonical form of an idiom, one makes a linguistic error. Mäntylä (2006, 158) notes that besides deliberately modifying an idiom, one can “play” with the figurative and literal senses of an expression.

3.1.2 Binominals

Binominals are commonly regarded as a sub-type of idioms and they can be defined as idioms with two equal headwords from the same part of speech, such as two nouns, verbs or adjectives (Biber et al. 1999, 1030-1031; Östberg 2002, 16). They differ from idioms in terms of variation since the headwords in a binominal are not normally altered and they occur in a fixed order (Moon 1998, 152; Östberg 2002, 16). Moon (1998, 153) therefore calls these expressions *irreversible binominals*. The headwords in a binominal are linked with a conjunction, usually *and* or *or*, as in *rain cats and dogs*, *no good to man or beast*. They can even be combined with a preposition (e.g. *head to foot*) or be preceded by a preposition (e.g. *from cradle to grave*) (Moon 1998, 154; Östberg 2002, 16).

Binominals often contain alliteration (e.g. *through thick and thin*), rhyme (e.g. *high and dry*) or *assonance*, in other words, internal rhyming in which the vowels are identical but the consonants merely similar (Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen 2005, 51; Östberg 2002, 16; Moon 1998, 154-155). The headwords can be synonyms (e.g. *bits and pieces* or *nooks and crannies*) and thus have an emphatic function or they can be *antonyms*, that is, have opposite meanings, as in *feast or famine* and *sink or swim* (Moon 1998, 155-156). In addition, some binominals contain old-fashioned or even obsolete words which may only have survived in that particular expression, such as *spic(k) and span*, *kith and kin* (Moon 1998, 156).

3.2 Similes

Similes constitute the second main type of figurative multi-word expressions. They are easily distinguished from idioms by their specific structure because they always contain the comparative particle(s) (*as*)...*as* or the comparative word *like*, for instance, *as free as a bird* or *like a bear with a*

sore head. A number of similes usually occur with a verb, such as *die like a dog* or *take something like a duck to water*. The first *as* particle, also called *the introductory as*, is always optional and occurs before the head (Norrick 1986, 39; Moon 2008, 5). Moon (2008, 4-5) observes that the comparative particle *as* is used after adjectival heads and that the majority of adjectives in similes are monosyllabic or disyllabic ending in *-y*, as the following examples taken from my idiom collection demonstrate: *mad as a hornet*, *as hungry as a bear*. Norrick (1986, 39) argues that the comparative particle *like* is normally employed after verbal headwords in similes (e.g. *sleep like a log*), while Moon (1998, 152) sees the verbal head as an optional element preceding *like* (e.g. *like headless chickens*). As in binominals, alliteration, assonance, rhythm and rhyme are commonly found in similes, for instance in *fit as a fiddle*, *snug as a bug in a rug* and *drunk as a skunk* (Moon 2008, 5; Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen 2005, 45, 51).

In a simile, the right part, that is, the comparison with the particle *as* or *like*, emphasises the meaning of the left part and the actual meaning of the right part is thus 'very', 'much', or 'big' (Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen 2005, 326; Moon 1998, 150; Norrick 1986, 46). As Prentice and Sköldberg (2010, 8) state, the comparison in a simile generally intensifies the meaning of an adjective or a verb, as the following similes attested in my data show: *as quiet as a lamb* 'very quiet' or *be as sick as a dog* 'be very ill'. The left part, in other words, the topic or property of the comparison is sometimes called the *tertium* and the right part, that is, the noun phrase following *as* or *like*, is termed the *vehicle* of the comparison (Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen 2005, 44; Norrick 1986, 39).

Svensén (2004, 244) argues that similes are not completely fixed in form and that syntactic variation is found especially in similes which contain a verb and it is created by changes of tense or number. Moon (2008, 5) disagrees with Svensén and states that syntactic variation is infrequent with similes because of their basic structure which always includes the comparative particle *as* or *like*. However, Moon (2008, 9-10) shares Svensén's (2004, 244) view that lexical variation is possible in similes, as in the following similes attested in my data: *as strong as an ox/horse*, *like a cat on a hot*

tin roof/on hot bricks.

According to Svensén (2004, 244, 254), similes are only partly metaphorical because some of the words in them occur in their literal sense, as in *dead as a doornail* ‘completely dead’ (Ayto 2009, 88). The non-metaphorical part in a simile precedes the comparative particle *as* or *like* and it often contains a verb (Svensén 2004, 244). The following similes taken from my idiom data exemplify the partial metaphoricity of many similes: *work like a beaver* ‘work steadily and industriously’ and *eat like a bird* ‘eat very little’ (Ayto 2009, 23; Stern 2000, 27). On the other hand, Dobrovol’skij and Piirainen (2005, 46) point out that similes which contain a constituent denoting an animal are problematic in terms of partial metaphoricity since the left part (the tertium) of such a simile expresses a characteristic of the animal which is based on cultural beliefs (e.g. *as wise as an owl*). They (ibid.) emphasise that “[i]n such cases the simile in question is strongly idiomatic because the choice of the animal is arbitrary, grounded not on reality but in cultural conventions”. Norrick (1986, 40) concurs with this view by saying that our cultural beliefs are animated not only in similes but also in many proverbs.

3.3 Proverbs

The third type of figurative multi-word expressions comprises proverbs. A *proverb* can be defined as a figurative expression which consists of a whole clause or a two-clause sentence and which usually teaches a lesson or contains a moral (Mäntylä 2004, 74). Dobrovol’skij and Piirainen (2005, 49-50) note that there is no generally accepted definition of the term *proverb* despite extensive literature on the subject. Proverbs are distinguished from idioms by their structure, meaning and functions (Dobrovol’skij and Piirainen 2005, 50; Mäntylä 2006, 152). Proverbs are structurally more stable and independent than idioms (Dobrovol’skij and Piirainen, 2005, 50; Sköldberg 1999, 17). Svensén (2004, 244) observes that in a proverb, the verb generally stands in the present tense, as the following proverbs taken from my idiom collection show: *Birds of a feather flock together* and *You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink*.

Unlike idioms, proverbs have a generalising function and they are used to express universal truths or folk wisdom (Dobrovolskij and Piirainen 2005, 51; Mäntylä 2006, 152). This is why they usually contain a “universal quantifier” (e.g. *every, all, any, each, always, never, no*), as in the proverb *Every dog has its day*. As Dobrovolskij and Piirainen (2005, 51-52) point out, proverbs include recommendations on how to behave in particular situations and thus reflect the values of a certain culture, whereas idioms do not have this recommending function. According to Östberg (2002, 17), proverbs function as advice or warnings with an explicit modal element which states what one must (not), can or has to do, as the following proverbs attested in my idiom collection illustrate: *Let sleeping dogs lie* or *Don't count your chickens before they're hatched*. Sköldberg (1999, 18) argues that proverbs are often employed to make our observations not only more general but also more powerful. Virtanen and Dubois (2000, 260-261) observe that proverbs are also used as an indirect strategy to express critical observations in an impersonal way.

As Sköldberg (1999, 15-16) states, the majority of proverbs have a figurative meaning. Proverbs thus resemble idioms in that they should not be interpreted literally (Sköldberg 1999, 16-17; Svensén 2004, 245). However, Löflund (2000, 67) notes that the boundary between proverbs and idioms is rarely clear. The meaning of a proverb is closely related to the context in question and it can change over time (Virtanen and Dubois 2000, 259). For this reason, it can be difficult to understand the meaning of a proverb correctly (Stålhammar 1997, 45). Some proverbs can eventually become obsolete if “their sentiments or insights cease to be recognized as valid within the community” (Virtanen and Dubois 2000, 259).

According to Löflund (2000, 67) and Sköldberg (1999, 18), proverbs can be varied, whereas Svensén (2004, 244) rejects this view by stating that proverbs are completely fixed in form and that consequently, not even the tense of a verb can be changed in them. Nevertheless, many conventional proverbs can be shortened and it is, for instance, possible to say *a bird in the hand* instead of the full form *A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush*. These reduced versions are actually more frequent than the original forms which may even be obsolete, and a number of idioms originate from such

archaic proverbs (Dobrovolskij and Piirainen 2005, 52; Moon 1996, 251). According to Moon (1998, 131), the shortened form can be regarded as elliptical because “in many cases an allusion to the original and fuller form remains”.

4. Animals in figurative multi-word expressions

English idioms come from various sources but a large number of them originate from “the everyday life of Englishmen” (Seidl and McMordie 1978, 5). Animal constituents are relatively common in figurative language (see, for example, Dobrovolskij and Piirainen 2005, 323; Sorvali 1980, 315, 327). Their popularity in different languages may be explained by the fact that nature has traditionally been of central importance for human beings, especially in agrarian society in the past (Allwood 1983, 1, 3; Nesi 1995, 274).

Östberg (2005, 25) emphasises that the meaning of those animal constituents which are used in figurative animal expressions differs significantly from their conventional meaning. Animal idioms and similes are commonly used to describe the behaviour and characteristics of humans. As Dobrovolskij and Piirainen (2005, 325-326) state, the way people interpret the characteristics of animals often depends on observations about their behaviour in nature. It is interesting to note that animals are typically used to exemplify mainly negative, physical human characteristics (Allwood 1983, 4-5). This association between animals and undesirable characteristics may arise from the fact that animals are often regarded as “lower forms of life” by humans (Moon 1998, 196-197). Colin (2005, 23) employs the term *personification* to describe the phenomenon where a desirable or undesirable characteristic of an animal is applied to human beings. According to her (2005, 24), personification is an indirect way to portray human behaviour or states.

Although there are negative connotations associated with the behaviour of certain species, the use of a particular animal constituent can also depend on some other feature, such as the appearance of the animal (Koski 1992, 26). My idiom data contain idioms and similes which are based on either the behaviour of various species (e.g. *a red rag to a bull, like a rabbit/deer caught in the*

*headlights*⁴) or their appearance, for instance, *an ugly duckling* and *A leopard can't change its spots*⁵. Interestingly, Allwood (1983, 6) argues that negative qualities related to appearance, behaviour or physical characteristics are usually associated with domesticated animals, while positive qualities are mainly connected with wild animals.

Nevertheless, there are differences between languages in terms of which animals are employed in figurative multi-word expressions. Different animal constituents are connected with similar qualities in various languages but, on the other hand, same species are associated with several qualities in diverse cultures (Koski 1992, 25; Nesi 1995, 274). In many cases, figurative animal expressions are based on various types of European verbal folklore, such as fairy tales, folk tales and fables and some have their roots in the Bible (see, for example, Piirainen 2011, 117-120; Dobrovolskij and Piirainen 2005, 116; Nesi 1995, 274). They contain old beliefs and institutionalised views of animals and may therefore be considered “evaluative stereotypes” associated with various species (Moon 1998, 196-197).

Fairy tales, such as those written by the brothers Grimm, are a source of a number of figurative animal expressions, including the idioms *an ugly duckling* and *to be a bird in a gilded cage* (Piirainen 2011, 120-121). Various multi-word expressions which contain an animal constituent originate from the Greek author Aesop's (500 BC) fables and are found in several European languages, for example equivalents to the English idioms *to enter the lion's den* and *a wolf in sheep's clothing* (Piirainen 2011, 120; Allwood 1983, 4). Sorvali (1980, 322) observes that Aesop's fables not only contain a moral but also tell modern people about a time when human beings used to live close to nature.

Besides Aesop's fables and fairy tales, some figurative animal expressions have their origin in other old animal tales whose purpose was to entertain but not to teach a moral lesson (Piirainen

⁴ The idiom *a red rag to a bull* means that ‘something always makes a particular person very angry’ (Sinclair 2011, 49). The simile *like a rabbit/deer caught in the headlights* is used to say that ‘someone is so frightened or nervous that they do not know what to do’ (Sinclair 2011, 186).

⁵ The idiom *an ugly duckling* refers to ‘someone who is not as attractive, skilful etc as other people when they are young, but who becomes beautiful and successful later’ (Stern 2000, 96). The proverb *A leopard can't change its spots* is used to say that ‘people, groups, organisations etc cannot easily change their bad qualities’ (Stern 2000, 207).

2011, 121, 125). As Piirainen (2011, 125) says, these animal tales are once well-known folk stories about animals which behave like humans, as *cat* and *dog* in the simile *to be/fight like cat and dog*. Other sources of common European animal idioms and especially proverbs include the Bible, mainly the Old Testament, from which originate the following expressions: *cast pearls before swine*; *separate the sheep from the goats*; *kill the fatted calf* (Piirainen 2011, 120; Vahtera 2000, 48; Seidl and McMordie 1978, 5). Another significant source of figurative animal expressions are old myths and legends which contain animal symbolism and ancient beliefs related to different animals (e.g. *to rise like a phoenix from the ashes*; *to weep/shed crocodile tears*⁶ (Piirainen 2011, 127-128, 130).

5. Analysis

In this chapter, I will present the results of the idiom dictionary analysis. The subchapter 5.1 begins with some general comments on the idiom dictionary analysis, followed by a discussion of the lexical and syntactic variation (5.2) and the regional differences (5.3) attested in the data. In 5.4 and 5.5, I will consider the most common animal constituents and verbs in English animal idioms and similes.

5.1 General observations on the idiom dictionary analysis

The results of the idiom dictionary analysis are based on the previously mentioned two monolingual idiom dictionaries and five bilingual idiom dictionaries or books (see 2.2). In addition, one electronic source was analysed and it consists of animal idioms presented in the BBC World Service (hereafter BBC) (Woodham 2011).

The analysis resulted in 506 multi-word animal expressions, and Appendix 1 lists all the animal idioms, similes and proverbs which were found in the idiom dictionaries. The number of

⁶ The simile *to rise like a phoenix from the ashes* is based on an old Greek story in which the phoenix is a bird which burns itself to ashes in its nest, is reborn every 500 years and rises from the ashes (Piirainen 2011, 128; Stern 2000, 261). The idiom *to weep/shed crocodile tears* relates to an ancient belief that “crocodiles sighed and groaned to attract their prey, and wept while they were eating it” (Sinclair 2011, 83).

animal expressions in each dictionary is as follows (WE1-WE4 are considered to constitute one dictionary): *CCID* has 318 instances of animal expressions, *LID* consists of 320 animal idioms and similes, *REK* comprises 35 animal expressions, *WEI-WE4* contain 35 instances and the additional source (*BBC*) consists of 26 animal expressions. It should be pointed out that the various idiom dictionaries differ in their definitions of the concept *idiom* which consequently affects the number of figurative multi-word expressions they incorporate. In relation to its size (over 3000 idioms), *CCID* includes more figurative animal expressions than *LID* which comprises more than 6000 idioms. It is important to bear in mind that all the bilingual sources (*REK* and *WEI-WE4*) and the additional source (*BBC*) have a much more limited scope than the monolingual idiom dictionaries since they only list 328 expressions in total. What is more, the books *WEI-WE4* solely consist of English figurative expressions which have a Finnish equivalent.

In addition, there are differences between various idiom dictionaries in terms of which types of expressions they include. Figure 2 presents the various types of figurative animal expressions found in all the sources:

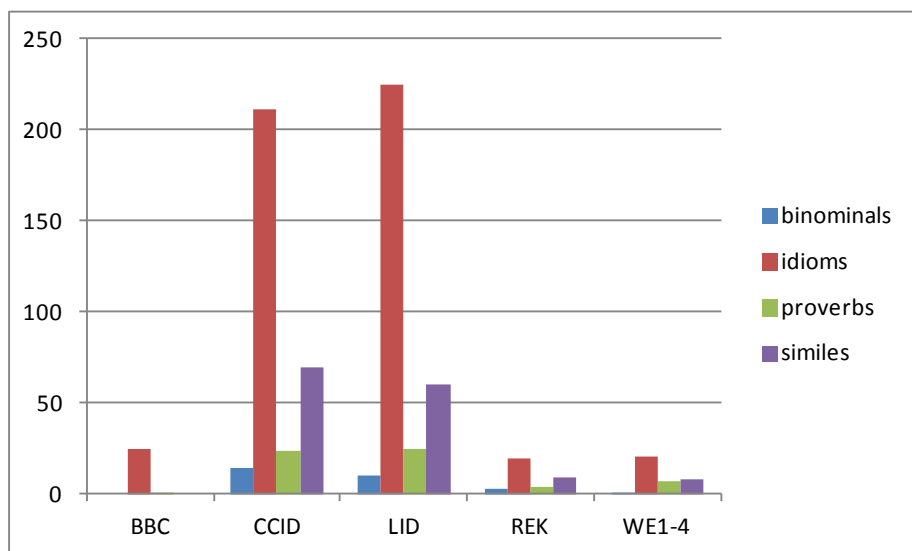


Figure 2. The total number of the different types of figurative animal expressions in the idiom dictionaries. As can be seen from Figure 2, the majority of animal expressions listed in the dictionaries are idioms, the second most common type is similes and proverbs are in third place. From the data in the figure, it is also apparent that idioms are especially common in *LID* and *CCID*. It is worth noting that the sources, particularly *LID* and *CCID*, to a large extent list the same figurative

expressions which contain an animal constituent. According to Löflund (2000, 65), the fact that a considerable number of the same idioms are found in several idiom dictionaries demonstrates that these figurative multi-word expressions are generally established in the language in question. Thus, when the similar variants of certain animal expressions in different dictionaries are excluded from the results, my idiom dictionary data comprise approximately 315 different animal idioms, similes and proverbs (see Appendix 1).

The figurative animal expressions appear in diverse structures in the idiom dictionaries that were investigated, for instance, in a combination of a noun and an adjective, such as *a red herring* or in more complex combinations of a verb and a following noun phrase or a prepositional phrase, as in *hold your horses* or *have a frog in your throat*. The most typical structure of an animal idiom is a verb phrase with its various complements, as illustrated by the previous examples. Idioms containing a verb will be discussed in more detail in 5.5. Other common idiom structures found in the data include noun phrases (e.g. *a one-horse race*; *a dog's dinner*), prepositional phrases (e.g. *from the horse's mouth*; *in a pig's eye!*), binominals (e.g. *play ducks and drakes*) and whole sentences (e.g. *The early bird catches/gets the worm*; *If you pay peanuts, you get monkeys*). There are also a number of idioms which have two different animal constituents in them, including *set a fox to keep the geese* and *run with the hare and hunt with the hounds*. In addition, the data include both verbless similes and similes which contain a verb, such as *happy as a lark*, *like a moth to a flame* and *drink like a fish*. As the above examples show, the most common patterns of similes in the data are the following: (*as*) + adjective + *as* + noun, and (verb) + *like* + noun (see Moon 1998, 150, 152).

5.2 Lexical and structural variation

The idiom dictionary analysis shows that figurative animal expressions vary both in terms of their vocabulary and their structure. Lexical variation primarily occurs in the animal word, the verb or some other constituent. In my idiom data, an animal constituent is altered more often in *as*-similes

than in idioms or proverbs. This variation is exemplified by the following examples taken from my data: *throw somebody to the wolves/lions/dogs* and *sick as a parrot/pig/dog*. Usually the different animal constituents used in these idiom or simile variants denote the same characteristic, situation or state, such as physical strength in the simile variants *strong as a bull/horse/an ox*. The interchangeability of certain animal constituents does not, to a great extent, affect the meaning of the whole expression, at least not in similes (Colin 2005, 24). However, as Colin (2005, 24-25) remarks, in some cases, a substitution of the animal also changes the meaning of the idiom or simile, as in *to eat like a bird/horse/pig* which reflect different ways of eating⁷. According to Hellquist (2005, 83), there is more variation in the animal constituent in an idiom or a simile if the image of the particular animal is rather vague, in other words, if people are not familiar with the species.

In my study, verb variation is slightly more common than alternating nouns in figurative animal expressions and it is illustrated by the following examples: *set/put the cat among the pigeons* and *be dying/dropping/going down like flies*. Verbs are varied 63 times and nouns 43 times, although in the majority of expressions (400 instances), there is no variation in either nouns or verbs. Other types of lexical variation, including alternating adjectives, prepositions and conjunctions are also attested in my idiom data: *rare/scarce as hen's teeth*, *have other/bigger fish to fly*, *in/into the lion's den*, and *when/while the cat's away, the mice will play*. Nenonen (2002, 128) observes in her study of Finnish idioms that idioms containing a verb phrase are more prone to lexical variation than idioms consisting of a noun phrase. Nenonen's view is supported by the findings of my study since lexical variation is attested in 128 verb phrase idioms and in 39 noun phrase idioms in my data.

Besides lexical variation, different types of structural variation occur in the data, although they are less frequent than alterations related to vocabulary. Structural variation attested in the data involves differences in number, varied word order and optional constituents which (do not) change

⁷ *Eat like a bird* means 'to eat small quantities because you have a little appetite', while *eat like a horse* means the opposite, that is, 'to eat a lot because you have a large appetite', and *eat like a pig* implies 'to eat a lot, usually in a noisy and disgusting manner' (Sinclair 2011, 28, 202, 281; Colin 2005, 24-25).

the meaning of the expression: *kill the goose that lays the golden egg/eggs; a game of cat and mouse* or *play a cat and mouse game; be (sitting) in the catbird seat; change horses (in midstream)*. My data also include antonymous idioms and proverbs, for instance *a big fish in a small pond* or *a small fish in a big pond* and *You can't teach an old dog new tricks* or *You can teach an old dog new tricks*. There are even a number of idiom clusters, in other words, expressions which have a similar meaning and which share some constituents, such as the following set: *grin/smile like a Cheshire cat, a Cheshire cat grin/smile* and *smile a Cheshire cat smile* (see Moon 2008, 9-10).

5.3 Variation between British and American English

According to the results of my idiom dictionary analysis, the majority of animal idioms and similes exist both in British and in American English. Aijmer (2007, 567) shares this view by stating that when studying “set phrases” in the regional varieties of English, the similarities are likely to outnumber the differences. Nevertheless, there are 139 figurative animal expressions which are exclusively or mainly used in only one of the varieties; there are 88 BrE idioms and similes and 37 AmE idioms (see Figure 3). In addition, there are expressions which are mainly used in BrE (six idioms), AmE (six idioms and one simile), or Australian English (one idiom). As Figure 3 clearly shows, BrE idioms are much more common than AmE idioms in the data.

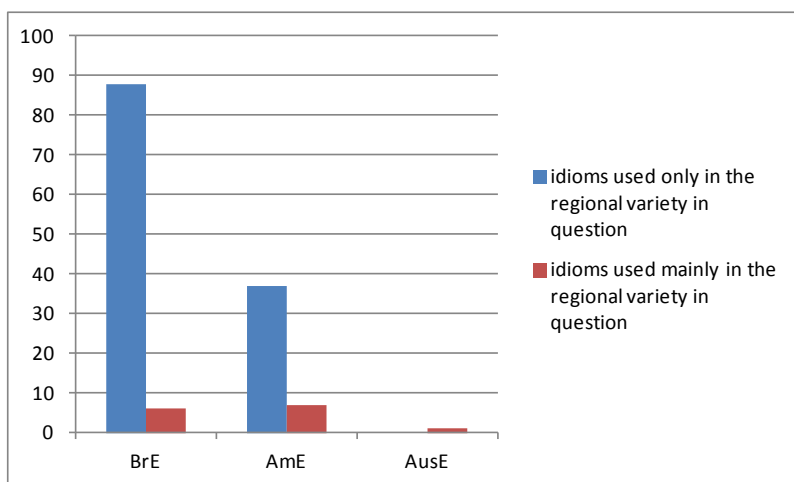


Figure 3. The total number of British, American and Australian English animal idioms in the data.

This variation between British and American English is exemplified by the following idioms

and similes: *it's brass monkeys* and *like the cat that got the cream* (BrE) and *be loaded for bear* and *naked as a jaybird* (AmE). It must be noted that some of the regional idioms might spread from one variety to another, especially from American to British English. Moon (1998, 134-135) points out that American culture and media seem to have an impact on British English idioms since some of the American idiom variants are becoming increasingly popular in Great Britain.

According to Moon (1998, 133), there are more idioms in which the noun rather than the verb varies between American and British English. The following pairs of examples taken from my idiom dictionary data illustrate lexical variation between the two varieties: the noun varies in *happy as a clam* (AmE) and *happy as a pig in muck* (BrE), and in *like a cat on hot bricks* (BrE) and *like a cat on a hot tin roof* (AmE), whereas the verb varies in *flog a dead horse* (BrE) and *beat a dead horse* (AmE), and in *give/flip somebody the bird* (AmE) and *give somebody the bird* or *get the bird* (BrE). In the last pair of examples, the British English idiom variants have a different meaning than the American ones, although the wording in both expressions is similar. Furthermore, there are a few idiom synonyms in the regional varieties, such as the American English idiom *in a coon's age* and its British English equivalent *for donkey's years*, and the idiom synonyms *close the barn door after the horse has gone* (AmE) and *close the stable door after the horse has bolted* (BrE).

Some figurative animal expressions in my data seem to reflect cultural rather than lexical differences, such as the idioms *talk turkey* or *play possum*, which are mainly used in American English. The data even include one idiom which is mainly used in Australian English, namely *kangaroos in your top paddock*. According to *CCID* (Sinclair 2011, vii), Australian English idioms mainly consist of American and British English expressions. As Fernando (1996, 93) says, the occurrence of certain animal constituents in a language is related to the “eco-significance” of these species in this particular culture, in other words, to the existence and importance of these animals in the country in question. In Aijmer's (2007, 565) opinion, “[t]he use of phrases which are specific to or more frequent in a certain variety or language can be shown to be related to cultural norms, values or identities”.

5.4 The most frequent animal constituents in English animal idioms and similes

My idiom data consist of 109 different animals which are used in figurative multi-word expressions in English. Table 1 presents the most common animals in English animal expressions and shows the number and percentages of each animal constituent:

Animal	Number of Tokens	Percentage
dog	32	9,25 %
cat	26	7,51 %
horse	22	6,36 %
bird	16	4,62 %
fish	11	3,18 %
pig	11	3,18 %
monkey	10	2,89 %
duck	10	2,89 %
bull	9	2,60 %
lamb	7	2,02 %
fly	7	2,02 %
chicken	7	2,02 %
goose	7	2,02 %
sheep	6	1,73 %
lion	6	1,73 %
wolf	6	1,73 %
bee	5	1,45 %
rat	5	1,45 %
bear	5	1,45 %
worm	5	1,45 %

Table 1. The most frequent animals in figurative multi-word expressions.

As Table 1 indicates, the most frequent animal constituents in my idiom data are *dog*, *cat*, *horse*, *bird*, *fish* and *pig*. Animal expressions containing these constituents make 34% of the total number of animal idioms, similes and proverbs in the idiom dictionary data. It is interesting to note that four of the most typical animals used in figurative expressions are domesticated animals and together they account for 23% of the total number of animal expressions. Colin (2005, 16) also observes the popularity of domesticated animals in English animal idioms and mentions such species as *dog*, *cat*, *horse*, *pig*, *chicken* and *sheep*.

Despite the relative popularity of certain species, most of the 109 animal constituents are not included in Table 1. This omission is explained by the fact that the majority of the animals are only

employed in a few expressions, for instance *parrot*, *elephant* or *camel*. Interestingly, some of these less popular species are more exotic animals which are not found in English nature. It is noteworthy that 56% of all the animal constituents, that is to say, 61 animals are only used in a single figurative multi-word expression, such as the constituents *bunny*, *kitten* and *whale*. This observation is supported by the findings of Colin's (2005, 15) study, in which she found that a large number of different species are employed in English animal idioms and similes. She (2005, 27) concludes that the use of a wide variety of animals in English "appear[s] to reflect the diversity of natural environments of the various English-speaking countries". Next, I will examine the five most common animal constituents more closely.

According to my study, *the dog* is the most frequently used animal in English idioms and similes since it is employed in every tenth figurative animal expression (32 instances). Dogs are the oldest domesticated animals and they have been known to humans since the Bronze Age (Hellquist 2005, 207). Sorvali (1980, 334) argues that the constituent *dog* primarily denotes negative qualities in figurative multi-word expressions. Koski (1992, 28) concurs with Sorvali's view that the constituent *dog* is used in negative contexts in which it has two different functions: to describe "dog-like" behaviour or the watchfulness of the animal. In my idiom data, there are surprisingly no instances in which this animal constituent realises the latter function, whereas the first sense occurs frequently and is exemplified by the following expressions: *like a dog with a bone* and *all of the dogs aren't barking*⁸. In addition, my data include a number of idioms in which *dog* refers to negative situations or states: *dog eat dog* and *be in the doghouse*⁹. On the other hand, there are also a few expressions in which this animal denotes more positive qualities or situations, as in the proverb *Every dog has its day* or in the idiom *top dog*¹⁰.

⁸ *Like a dog with a bone* refers to 'someone who will not stop trying to do something, or thinking about something' (Stern 2000, 89). *All of the dogs aren't barking* is used to say that someone is 'stupid or slightly crazy' (Stern 2000, 211).

⁹ The idiom *dog eat dog* describes 'a situation, especially in business, in which people who want to succeed are willing to do anything to get what they want' (Stern 2000, 89). *Be in the doghouse* means that 'someone is annoyed with you because of something you have done' (ibid.).

¹⁰ *Every dog has its day* means that 'even the most unimportant person has a time in their life when they are successful or noticed' (Stern 2000, 89). *Top dog* refers to 'the person who has the highest or most important position, especially after a struggle' (ibid.).

The cat is in second place and it accounts for almost eight percent of all the figurative animal expressions (26 instances). According to Sorvali (1980, 337), cats belong to the most common domesticated animals besides dogs. However, as Hellquist (2005, 207) remarks, cats were domesticated several thousand years later than dogs. Sorvali (1980, 337-338) says that figurative expressions with the constituent *cat* reflect various, mainly negative characteristics of the animal, such as its cruelty, playfulness or quickness. Similarly, my idiom data consist of both positive idioms and similes (e.g. *like the cat that got the cream; the cat's whiskers/pyjamas*) and negative expressions (e.g. *curiosity killed the car; look like something the cat dragged in*). Nevertheless, the majority of the figurative expressions which have the constituent *cat* are negative or even cruel in terms of the actions they describe and in relation to the animal's role in them, as the following idioms illustrate: *you could not swing a cat; there's more than one way to skin a cat*.

The horse is the third most common animal constituent and it accounts for about six percent of all the animal expressions in the data (22 instances). As Hellquist (2005, 74) states, horses have been known to and utilised by humans for millennia. Sorvali (1980, 336-337) also points out that the horse is among the animals which have given rise to numerous figurative multi-word expressions and adds that it is usually employed in positive expressions. My results partly challenge Sorvali's view since the majority of the idioms and proverbs which contain the constituent *horse* are rather negative (e.g. *wild horses would/could not drag somebody; get on your high horse*¹¹). The only exceptions seem to be similes containing this constituent because they refer to the animal's strength, appetite or its ability to work hard (e.g. *strong as a horse; eat like a horse; work like a horse*).

The hyperonym *bird* is in fourth place and it accounts for five percent of all the animals in my data. In Hellquist's (2005, 47) opinion, this hyperonym is employed more commonly in figurative animal expressions than its various hyponyms, such as *crow* or *lark*. My idiom dictionary results do

¹¹ *Get on your high horse* is an idiom which shows disapproval of someone who is behaving as if they are better than other people and who does not want to be criticised (Sinclair 2011, 202).

not confirm this view since there are 16 different figurative animal expressions in which the hyperonym *bird* is used and 56 instances which include diverse bird species. In my data, the most popular birds are *duck* (10 expressions), *chicken* and *goose* (seven expressions each). Furthermore, the hyperonym *fish* is relatively common in multi-word figurative expressions since it accounts for about three percent of all the animal constituents (11 expressions). The idiom data also include 11 expressions in which various species of fish or crustaceans are employed, the most common being the animal constituent *clam* (two similes).

As Table 1 (see p. 26) shows, the only hyperonyms in figurative animal expressions are the previously mentioned constituents *bird* and *fish* which together account for about eight percent of all the animal hyperonyms in the data. Nevertheless, other hyperonyms, for example the constituent *animal*, are infrequent in figurative animal expressions, and the data only include two idioms which have this particular hyperonym. Moon (1998, 196) also observes that hyperonyms are generally not used in animal expressions and suggests that this is because these “general words such as *animal* are too neutral to engender these kinds of institutionalized metaphors”.

On the basis of the idiom dictionary results, I created a classification of all the animal constituents in English idioms, similes and proverbs (see Appendix 2). As the appendix illustrates, the largest group is Domesticated animals which consists of 31 species and it is followed by Wild animals which has 25 members. Other larger categories include Birds (23 different birds), Insects and parasites (12 species), and Fish and crustaceans (10 species). It should be pointed out that some animals belong to more than one category, especially several birds are also included in the group Domesticated animals because they unquestionably fulfil the characteristics of both classes. Table 1 (see p. 26) also shows the popularity of these animal classes since 50% of the 20 most frequent animal constituents belong to the group of Domesticated animals (10 species), while 25% (five species) consists of wild animals and the remaining five are either hyperonyms or insects.

5.5 The most frequent verbs in English animal idioms and similes

The majority (63%) of the figurative animal expressions in the data consist of a verb phrase and its complements and 37% of the idioms and similes contain no verbs. Altogether, the figurative animal expressions occur with 128 different verbs in the data. Table 2 shows the most common verbs which are used in the figurative multi-word animal expressions and the number and the percentage of each verb:

Verb	Number of Tokens	Percentage
be	60	18,52 %
have	20	6,17 %
do	12	3,70 %
make	12	3,70 %
go	10	3,09 %
get	9	2,78 %
can	7	2,16 %
play	7	2,16 %
would	5	1,54 %
eat	5	1,54 %
talk	5	1,54 %

Table 2. The most frequent verbs in English animal idioms, similes and proverbs.

As can be seen from the table, the most frequent verbs include *be*, *have*, *do*, *make*, *go*, *get* and *can*. There are three primary verbs (*be*, *have*, *do*), three activity verbs (*make*, *go*, *get*), two auxiliary verbs (*can*, *would*) and a number of more specific verbs, such as *play*, *eat* and *talk* (see Biber et al. 1999, 373). *Be* is clearly the most frequent verb and it accounts for about 19% of all the verbs which are used in English animal idioms, similes and proverbs (60 instances). The surprisingly large number of occurrences of *be* are explained by the fact that it functions both in its main verb role and in its auxiliary verb role in the figurative animal expressions, as exemplified by the following idioms: *the world is your oyster*; *somebody is living in cloud-cuckoo land*. *Be* is used as a main verb in 49 instances and as an auxiliary verb in 11 instances, and these numbers account for 82% and 18% of all the occurrences of *be*, respectively.

The second most common verb in English animal expressions is the verb *have*. As Biber et al. (1999, 429-430) state, it is among the most common transitive main verbs and it also functions as

an auxiliary verb in marking perfect aspect. These various roles of *have* explain its relatively high frequency in the data, although it primarily occurs as a main verb in idioms, similes and proverbs, as the following expressions show: *have a bee in your bonnet*; *have a memory like an elephant*; *the chickens have come home to roost*. *Have* is used as a main verb in 70% of the expressions (14 instances) and as an auxiliary verb in only 30% of the cases (six instances).

According to the figures in Table 2, the verbs *do* and *make* are in third place and together they account for almost eight percent of all the verbs in the data. It is interesting to note that *do* is used as an auxiliary verb in about 67% of the expressions (eight instances) and as a main verb in only 33% of the cases (four idioms). The use of *do* as an auxiliary verb may be explained by the fact that this verb is mainly used in proverbs which often state what one must not do, as in the following examples: *Don't put the cart before the horse*; *Don't look a gift horse in the mouth*. The verb *do* is used as a main verb in these three idioms: *do the donkey work*; *do something in two shakes (of a lamb's tail)* and *wild horses (would not make somebody do something)*. The use of the verb *make* is exemplified by the following expressions: *make sheep's eyes*; *make a mountain out of a molehill*; *make a silk purse out of a sow's ear*.

Interestingly, the most common verbs in my study partly correspond to Niemi's (2004, 250-252) and Biber et al.'s (1999, 1026-1029) findings since the following verbs are among the most frequent ones both in their investigations and in my study: *have*, *make* and *do*. There are 20 animal expressions with the verb *have* (about six percent of all the verbs), 12 animal expressions (around four percent) which contain the verb *make* and 12 expressions (around four percent) occur with the verb *do*. Biber et al. (1999, 428, 1026-1027) regard *have*, *do*, *make* and *take* as "semantically light verbs" (428) and add that these verbs are commonly combined with a noun phrase to form both idiomatic and non-idiomatic verbal idioms.

As Biber et al. (1999, 1024-1025) observe, there are a large number of verbal idioms in English which consist of a verb phrase and its complements. These idioms containing a verb can be divided into two types according to their structure: the first group comprises idioms which take a

noun phrase as their complement and the second type consists of idioms which are found with a prepositional phrase complement (Biber et al. 1999, 1025; Nenonen 2002, 128). Both patterns occur in my data but noun phrase idioms (e.g. *shoot the bull*; *see pink elephants*) are more common than prepositional phrase idioms (e.g. *go to the dogs*; *be in the catbird seat*). According to Fernando (1996, 34), the most typical structure of an idiom is “the semi-clausal pattern V + Det + N”, as in *chase the dragon*.

Niemi (2004, 250-251) discusses the most typical verbs in English idioms involving a body part, and in her study, the ten most frequent verbs are the following: *give, make, take, do, lose, cut, have, hold, keep* and *show*. The most common verbs in idioms usually belong to the so-called *basic verbs* in a language which means that they have a relatively general meaning which also depends on the context (Niemi 2004, 250-251; Nenonen 2002, 85, 88). As Niemi (2004, 251, 253) points out, it is therefore not the verb but its various complements which contribute to the meaning of the whole expression in idioms which contain a basic verb. On the other hand, the less common verbs mainly seem to consist of such verbs which have a more specific meaning (see Niemi 2004, 251). In my data these more specific verbs include the verbs *play, eat* and *talk*, which were mentioned earlier, and a few others, for instance *look* and *kill*.

Surprisingly, the results of my study contradict Biber et al.’s (1999, 428, 1026) claim that the verb *take* is among the most common idiom-forming verbs in English since it accounts for less than one percent of all the verbs in my data. On the other hand, certain verbs are relatively frequent in my data, although they do not belong to the most common verbs in Niemi’s (2004, 250-253) or Biber et al.’s (1999, 1025-1029) investigations. These include the previously mentioned verb *be* and the activity verbs *go* and *get* which are rather frequent in my data since they both account for about three percent of all the verbs.

Ingo (2000, 36) observes that the verb in an idiom can be omitted if the meaning of the verb is self-evident. Nenonen (2002, 90) points out that the meaning of the verb *take* is obvious in some expressions and that this verb can even be said to lack a meaning altogether, as in the expressions

take offense and *take aim*. My idiom data include idioms in which the verb can be omitted, and in these cases it is often the primary verb *be* in its auxiliary function but other verbs are left out, too, as the following expressions illustrate: *the tail (is) wagging the dog* and *the chickens (have) come home to roost*.

6. Conclusion

In this second subject thesis, I have examined which English idioms, similes and proverbs containing an animal constituent are found in monolingual and bilingual (English-Finnish) idiom dictionaries. I have also discussed the characteristics of figurative multi-word expressions and studied lexical, syntactic and regional variation attested in figurative animal expressions in idiom dictionaries. In addition, I have investigated which animal constituents and which verbs are most commonly used in figurative multi-word expressions.

To summarise, the findings of my study reveal that the most frequent type of figurative animal expressions are idioms, followed by similes, proverbs and binominals. The findings also show that lexical variation is more common than structural variation and that lexical variation is much more frequently attested in idioms which consist of a verb phrase than in noun phrase idioms. According to my data, the majority of figurative animal expressions exist both in British and in American English, although British English idioms are more numerous than American English expressions. There is clear evidence that the most frequently used animal constituents in figurative multi-word expressions are either domesticated animals (*dog, cat, horse, pig*) or hyperonyms (*bird, fish*). The most common verbs consist of primary verbs (*be, have, do*), activity verbs (*make, go, get*), auxiliary verbs (*can, would*) and more specific verbs (*play, eat, talk*).

Figurative multi-word animal expressions offer several possibilities for further research. I am particularly interested in examining the actual use of these expressions and in investigating which idiom variants are found in corpora, for instance in *the British National Corpus* and *the Corpus of Contemporary American English* which both contain written and spoken material from various text

types. These corpora would allow me to study the issues I am mainly interested in, namely lexical, morphological and regional variation in animal idioms, similes and proverbs. I would choose the most common animal constituents which emerged in this study and investigate all the figurative multi-word expressions related to these animals.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: The total number of figurative animal expressions in all the dictionaries studied

Phrase #	Phrase	Animal	Phrase type	Regional variety	BBC	CCID	LID	REK	WE1	WE2	WE3	WE4
1	an albatross (around sb's neck)	albatross	I				X					
1	(an albatross round sb's neck)	albatross	I	BrE			X					
2	a different animal	animal	I				X					
3	party animal	animal	I					X				
4	have ants in your pants	ant	I				X	X	X			
4	sb must have had worms for breakfast	worm	I	AmE			X					
5	go ape	ape	I			X	X					
5	go ape crazy	ape	I			X						
5	go apeshit	ape	I			X	X					
6	(as) blind as a bat	bat	S			X	X	X				
7	like a bat out of hell	bat	S			X	X				X	
8	sb has bats in his/her belfry	bat	I				X					
8	have bats in your belfry	bat	I			X						
9	a bearmarket	bear	I		X							
10	be like a bear with a sore head	bear	S				X					
10	like a bear with a sore head	bear	S			X		X				
11	be loaded for bear	bear	I	AmE			X					
11	loaded for bear	bear	I	AmE		X						
12	as hungry as a bear	bear	S					X				
13	Does a bear shit in the woods?	bear	I				X					
13	Is a frog's ass watertight?	frog	I	AmE			X					
14	make the beast with two backs	beast	I				X					
15	the nature of the beast	beast	I			X						
16	no good to man or beast	beast	B			X						
16	no use to man or beast	beast	B			X						
17	an eager beaver	beaver	I			X	X					
18	crazy as a bedbug	bedbug	S			X						
19	be the bee's knees	bee	I				X					
19	the bee's knees	bee	I		X	X						
20	sb has a bee in his/her bonnet (about sth)	bee	I				X					
20	have a bee in your bonnet	bee	I		X	X						
21	make a beeline for (something)	bee	I			X	X					
22	a busy bee	bee	I		X	X						
22	busy as a bee	bee	S			X						
22	be busy as a bee	bee	S					X				
23	the birds and the bees	bee, bird	B			X	X					
23	birds and bees	bee, bird	B					X				
24	a bird's-eye view (of sth)	bird	I			X	X					
25	a bird brain	bird	I				X					
26	the bird has flown	bird	I			X	X					
27	a bird in the hand (is worth two in the bush)	bird	P/I			X	X					
28	do bird	bird	I	BrE			X					
29	the early bird catches the worm	bird, worm	P			X	X					
29	the early bird gets the worm	bird, worm	P				X	X				
29	an early bird, early-bird	bird	I			X	X					
30	eat like a bird	bird	S			X	X	X				
31	give someone/sb the bird (1)	bird	I	AmE		X	X					
31	(flip (sb) the bird)	bird	I	AmE			X					
31	give someone/sb the bird (2)	bird	I	BrE		X	X					
31	get the bird	bird	I	BrE		X	X					
32	a little bird told me	bird	I			X	X	X				
33	a rare bird	bird	I			X	X					
34	(as) free as a bird	bird	S			X		X				
35	birds of a feather (flock together)	bird	P/I			X	X					
35	Birds of a feather flock together.	bird	P						X			
36	kill two birds with one stone	bird	I			X	X	X	X			

Phrase #	Phrase	Animal	Phrase type	Regional variety	BBC	CCID	LID	REK	WE1	WE2	WE3	WE4
37	be (strictly) for the birds	bird	I	esp. AmE			X					
37	for the birds	bird	I			X						
38	a bird of passage	bird	I			X						
39	naked as a jaybird	bird	S	AmE			X					
40	be bitten by the __bug	bug	I				X					
40	bitten by the bug	bug	I			X						
41	snug as a bug (in a rug)	bug	S				X					
41	snug as a bug in a rug	bug	S			X		X				
42	a bull market	bull	I		X							
43	take the bull by the horns	bull	I		X	X	X	X				
44	(shoot the bull)	bull	I	AmE			X					
45	a cock and bull story	bull, cock	B	BrE		X	X					
45	a cock and bull tale	bull, cock	B			X						
46	(like) a bull in a china shop	bull	S/I			X	X					
46	bull-in-a-china-shop	bull	I				X					
47	like a bull at a gate	bull	S	BrE			X					
48	a red flag before a bull	bull	I	esp. AmE		X						
48	a red rag to a bull	bull	I	esp. BrE		X						
48	sth is like waving/holding a red flag in front of a bull	bull	S	AmE			X					
48	sth is (like) a red rag to a bull	bull	S/I	BrE			X					
49	(money talks, bullshit walks)	bull	P	AmE			X					
50	sb is not a happy bunny	bunny	I	BrE			X					
51	have/get butterflies (in your stomach)	butterfly	I				X					
51	butterflies in your stomach	butterfly	I			X						
51	have/get butterflies	butterfly	I			X						
52	break a butterfly on a wheel	butterfly	I	BrE		X	X					
53	kill the fatted calf	calf	I			X						
54	the straw that breaks the camel's back	camel	P			X						
54	the last straw that breaks the camel's back	camel	P	BrE		X						
54	be the straw that breaks the camel's back	camel	P				X					
55	strain at a gnat and swallow a camel	camel, gnat	I			X						
55	strain at a gnat	gnat	I			X						
56	like the cat that ate the canary	cat, canary	S			X	X					
56	(like a/the cat that got the cream)	cat	S	BrE		X	X		X			
57	let the cat out of the bag	cat	I		X	X	X	X				
57	the cat is out of the bag	cat	I				X					
58	cat nap	cat	I		X							
59	That cat won't jump.	cat	I									X
60	like a cat on a hot tin roof	cat	S	AmE			X					X
60	a cat on a hot tin roof	cat	I			X						
60	like a cat on hot bricks	cat	S	BrE			X					
60	a cat on hot bricks	cat	I			X						
61	you could not swing a cat	cat	I			X	X					
61	no room to swing a cat	cat	I	esp. BrE		X						
61	(not enough room to swing a cat)	cat	I				X					X
62	curiosity killed the cat	cat	P			X	X	X				
63	cat got your tongue?	cat	I					X				
64	rain cats and dogs	cat, dog	B					X				
64	it's raining cats and dogs	cat, dog	B	BrE		X	X		X			
65	when the cat's away(,) the mice will play	cat, mouse	P			X		X				
65	when/while the cat's away (the mice will play)	cat, mouse	P/I			X	X					
66	the cat's whiskers	cat	I	BrE		X	X					
67	(the cat's pyjamas)	cat	I	BrE		X	X					
68	there's more than one way to skin a cat	cat	P			X	X					
69	copy cat	cat	I				X					
70	(a) fat cat	cat	I			X	X					
70	fat-cat	cat	I			X	X					

Phrase #	Phrase	Animal	Phrase type	Regional variety	BBC	CCID	LID	REK	WE1	WE2	WE3	WE4
71	play cat and mouse (with sb)	cat, mouse	B				X	X				
71	cat and mouse	cat	B			X						
71	a game of cat and mouse	cat, mouse	B			X						
71	(play a cat and mouse game)	cat	B				X					
72	fight like cat and dog	cat, dog	S	BrE		X	X					
72	fight like cats and dogs	cat, dog	S	AmE			X					
73	grin like a Cheshire cat	cat	S			X	X		X			
73	smile like a Cheshire cat	cat	S				X					
73	a Cheshire cat grin/smile	cat	I			X						
73	(smile a Cheshire cat smile)	cat	I				X					
74	set/put the cat among the pigeons	cat, pigeon	I	BrE		X	X					
75	look like something the cat dragged in	cat	S			X			X			
76	look what the cat's dragged in	cat	I			X						
77	like a scalded cat	cat	S	BrE		X						
78	not a cat in hell's chance	cat	I	BrE		X						
78	not a cat's chance in hell	cat	I	BrE		X						
78	(not have a cat in hell's chance)	cat	I	BrE			X					
79	see which way the cat jumps	cat	I	esp. BrE		X						
80	fight like Kilkenny cats	cat	S	BrE		X						
81	who's 'she', the cat's mother?	cat	I	esp. BrE			X					
82	be (sitting) in the catbird seat	catbird	I	AmE			X					
82	in the catbird seat	catbird	I	AmE		X						
83	(a cattle market)	cattle	I	esp. BrE		X	X					
84	a chicken and egg situation(/problem/dilemma) (1)	chicken	B				X					
84	a chicken and egg situation(/problem/dilemma) (2)	chicken	B				X					
84	chicken and egg (1)	chicken	B			X						
84	chicken and egg (2)	chicken	B			X						
85	chicken feed (chickenfeed) (1)	chicken	I			X	X					
85	chicken feed (2)	chicken	I			X						
86	be no spring chicken	chicken	I				X					
86	no spring chicken	chicken	I			X						
86	a spring chicken	chicken	I			X						
87	Don't count your chickens before they're hatched.	chicken	P			X	X		X			
87	don't count your chickens (before they're hatched)	chicken	P				X					
87	not count your chickens	chicken	I			X						
88	play chicken	chicken	I				X					
89	the chickens (have) come home to roost	chicken	I				X					
89	the chickens come home to roost	chicken	I			X	X					
90	like a headless chicken	chicken	S			X						
90	like a chicken with its head cut off	chicken	S			X						
91	happy as a lark	lark	S			X	X					
91	happy as a pig in shit	pig	S			X	X					
91	happy as a pig in muck	pig	S	BrE		X						
91	(happy as a clam)	clam	S	AmE		X	X					
92	shut up like a clam	clam	S			X						
93	warm the cockles of your heart	cockle	I			X	X					
94	in a coon's age	coon	I				X					
95	(a) cash cow	cow	I			X	X					
95	cash-cow	cow	I				X					
96	have a cow	cow	I	AmE		X	X					
97	a sacred cow	cow	I			X	X					
98	till the cows come home	cow	I				X					
98	until the cows come home	cow	I			X						
99	a creature of habit	creature	I				X					
100	shed crocodile tears	crocodile	I			X	X					
100	(weep/cry crocodile tears)	crocodile	I			X	X					
100	crocodile tears	crocodile	I			X						
101	as the crow flies	crow	I			X	X					
102	eat crow	crow	I	AmE		X	X					
103	stone the crows!	crow	I	BrE			X					

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104	a cuckoo in the nest	cuckoo	I	BrE			X					
105	sb is (living) in cloud-cuckoo land	cuckoo	I	BrE			X					
106	like a rabbit caught in the headlights	rabbit	S			X	X					
106	(like a deer caught in the headlights)	deer	S	AmE		X	X					
107	not hear a dickybird	dickybird	I	BrE			X					
108	((as)dead as a/the dodo)	dodo	S	BrE		X	X					
109	dog tired	dog	I		X							
109	be dog tired (be dog-tired)	dog	I				X					
110	let sleeping dogs lie	dog	P		X	X	X	X				
110	a sleeping dog	dog	I				X					
111	to go to the dogs	dog	I			X						X
111	sth is going to the dogs	dog	I				X					
112	be the (dog's) bollocks	dog	I	BrE			X					
112	the dog's bollocks	dog	I	BrE		X						
113	make a dog's breakfast/dinner (out) of sth	dog	I	BrE			X					
113	a dog's breakfast	dog	I	BrE		X						
113	a dog's dinner	dog	I	BrE		X						
114	a/the hair of the dog (that bit you)	dog	I			X	X					
115	the tail (is) wagging the dog	dog	I				X					
115	the tail wagging the dog	dog	I					X				
115	the tail wags the dog	dog	I			X						
116	you can't teach an old dog new tricks	dog	P			X	X					
116	you can teach an old dog new tricks	dog	P			X						
117	be as sick as a dog	dog	S					X				
117	(as) sick as a dog	dog	S			X	X					
118	it's a dog's life	dog	I			X	X					
118	lead a dog's life	dog	I					X				
119	every dog has its day	dog	P			X	X		X			
120	call off the dogs	dog	I			X	X					
120	to call off the hounds	hound	I							X		
121	be dressed up like a dog's dinner	dog	S	BrE			X					
122	to keep a dog and bark oneself	dog	I							X		
123	(you lie like a big dog (on a rug))	dog	S				X					
124	dog days (1)	dog	I				X					
124	dog days (the dog days of summer) (2)	dog	I				X					
125	dog eat dog, dog-eat-dog	dog	I			X	X					
126	a dog and pony show	dog, pony	B	AmE		X	X					
127	(be) a dog in the manger	dog	I				X					
127	dog-in-the-manger	dog	I			X	X					
128	sth is a dog	dog	I				X					
129	give a dog a bad name (and hang him)	dog	P/I				X					
130	like a dog with a bone	dog	S	BrE			X					
131	put on the dog	dog	I				X					
132	a shaggy dog story	dog	I				X					
133	top dog	dog	I				X					
134	be in the doghouse	dog	I				X					
134	in the doghouse	dog	I			X						
135	throw sb/someone to the dogs	dog	I			X	X					
136	die like a dog	dog	S			X						
137	all of the dogs aren't barking	dog	I				X					
138	going to see a man about a dog	dog	I				X					
139	do the donkey work	donkey	I	BrE	X	X						
139	(the) donkey work	donkey	I	BrE			X					
140	talk the hind leg off a donkey	donkey	I			X						
140	to talk the hind legs off a donkey	donkey	I									X
140	sb can/would talk the hind leg off a donkey	donkey	I				X					
141	for donkey's years	donkey	I	BrE			X					
141	donkey's years	donkey	I	BrE		X						
142	chase the dragon	dragon	I				X					

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143	fine weather for ducks	duck	I								X	
144	like a flying duck in a thunderstorm	duck	S								X	
145	take to something like a duck to water	duck	S			X	X				X	
146	sth is (like) water off a duck's back	duck	S/I				X					
146	like water off a duck's back	duck	S			X						
147	a dead duck	duck	I			X	X					
148	be a duck shoot	duck	I	AmE			X					
149	be a lame duck (1), lame-duck	duck	I				X					
149	a lame duck (1), lame-duck	duck	I			X						
149	a lame duck (2), lame-duck	duck	I			X						
150	be a sitting duck	duck	I				X					
150	a sitting duck, sitting-duck	duck	I			X						
151	get (all) your ducks in a row	duck	I	AmE			X					
151	get your ducks in a row	duck	I	AmE		X						
152	play ducks and drakes (with someone)	duck, drake	B	BrE		X	X					
153	an ugly duckling	duckling	I				X					
154	keep an eagle eye on (1)	eagle	I				X					
154	an eagle eye (1)	eagle	I			X						
154	an eagle eye (2)	eagle	I			X						
155	a legal eagle	eagle	I				X					
156	(as) slippery as an eel	eel	S			X	X					
156	a slippery eel	eel	I			X						
157	a white elephant	elephant	I			X	X					
157	white-elephant	elephant	I				X					
158	see pink elephants	elephant	I				X					
159	have a memory like an elephant	elephant	S				X					
159	(have the memory of an elephant)	elephant	I				X					
160	like shooting fish in a barrel	fish	S			X						
160	(like) shooting fish in a barrel	fish	S/I				X					
161	be/feel like a fish out of water	fish	S				X					
161	a fish out of water, fish-out-of-water	fish	I		X	X						
162	a cold fish	fish	I		X	X	X					
163	have other/bigger fish to fry	fish	I			X	X					
163	have other fish to fry	fish	I		X	X	X	X				
164	a big fish in a small pond	fish	I			X	X					
164	a big fish in a little pond	fish	I				X					
164	a big fish	fish	I			X						
164	(a big fish in a little/small pool)	fish	I				X					
164	a big frog in a small pond	frog	I	AmE		X						
164	a small fish in a big pond	fish	I			X						
165	drink like a fish	fish	S			X	X					
166	sb needs sth like a fish needs a bicycle	fish	I				X					
167	there are plenty more fish in the sea	fish	I			X	X					
167	(there are other fish in the sea)	fish	I			X	X					
168	another kettle of fish	fish	I			X	X					
168	(a different kettle of fish)	fish	I			X	X					
169	a fine/pretty kettle of fish	fish	I			X						
170	neither fish nor fowl	fish, fowl	B			X						
171	(fit as a flea)	flea	S	BrE		X	X					
172	send sb away with a flea in his/her ear	flea	I	BrE			X					
172	a flea in your ear	flea	I	BrE		X						
173	a fly on the wall, a-fly-on-the-wall	fly	I		X							
174	a fly in the ointment	fly	I		X			X		X		
174	a/the fly in the ointment	fly	I				X					
174	the fly in the ointment	fly	I			X						
175	sb/someone wouldn't hurt a fly	fly	I			X	X					
175	(sb/someone wouldn't harm a fly)	fly	I	BrE		X	X					
175	not hurt a fly	fly	I		X							

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176	there are no flies on someone	fly	I			X	X					
176	(there are) no flies on sb	fly	I				X					
176	no flies on someone	fly	I		X		X					
177	like a blue-arsed fly	fly	S	BrE		X	X					
178	be dropping/dying/(going down) like flies (1)	fly	S				X					
178	drop like flies (1)	fly	S				X					
178	drop like flies (2)	fly	S				X					
179	I'd like to be a fly on the wall...	fly	I				X					
179	a fly on the wall, fly-on-the-fall	fly	I				X					
180	to set a fox to keep the geese	fox, goose	I									X
181	crazy like a fox	fox	S	AmE			X					
182	have a frog in your throat	frog	I				X					X
182	a frog in your throat	frog	I				X					
183	act the goat	goat	I	BrE			X	X				
183	(play the giddy goat)	goat	I				X					
184	get sb's/someone's goat	goat	I				X	X				
185	live in a goldfish bowl	goldfish	I				X					
186	a wild goose chase	goose	I		X		X	X				
187	wouldn't say boo to a goose	goose	I				X	X				
188	cook sb's goose	goose	I				X					
188	cook your goose, your goose is cooked	goose	I				X					
188	that's cooked his goose, his goose is cooked	goose	I					X				
189	kill the goose that lays the golden egg/eggs	goose	I				X	X				
189	(kill the golden goose)	goose	I				X	X				
189	a golden goose	goose	I				X					
190	play gooseberry	goose	I	BrE			X	X				
190	(be a gooseberry)	goose	I				X					
191	what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander	goose, gander	P				X	X				
191	(what's) sauce for the goose (is sauce for the gander)	goose, gander	P				X	X				
192	knee-high to a grasshopper	grasshopper	I				X	X				
193	a guinea pig	guinea pig	I				X	X				
194	halcyon days	halcyon	I				X	X				
195	the wheel's still spinning but the hamster's dead	hamster	I				X					
196	start a hare	hare	I	BrE			X	X				
197	watch sb/someone like a hawk	hawk	S				X	X				
198	a hen night	hen	I		X							
199	rare/scarce as hen's teeth	hen	S	BrE			X	X				
200	a red herring	herring	I				X	X				
201	go hog wild	hog	I	AmE			X	X				
202	go the whole hog	hog	I				X	X				
202	go whole hog	hog	I	AmE			X					
203	live high on the hog	hog	I	esp. AmE			X	X				
204	stir up a hornet's nest	hornet	I				X	X				
205	mad as a hornet	hornet	S	AmE			X	X				
205	(madder than a hornet)	hornet	S				X					
206	flog a dead horse	horse	I	BrE	X	X			X			
206	beat a dead horse	horse	I	AmE		X		X				
206	be flogging a dead horse	horse	I	BrE			X					
206	be beating a dead horse	horse	I	AmE			X					
206	a dead horse	horse	I				X					
207	back/pick the wrong horse	horse	I				X	X				
207	(bet on the wrong horse)	horse	I	AmE			X	X				
208	a dark horse	horse	I	AmE			X	X				X
208	dark horse, dark-horse	horse	I	AmE			X	X				
209	close the stable door after the horse has bolted	horse	P	BrE			X					
209	close the barn door after the horse has gone	horse	P	AmE			X					
209	It's no good closing the stable door after the horse has bolted.	horse	P	BrE								X
210	Don't put the cart before the horse.	horse	I									X
210	put the cart before the horse	horse	I				X	X				
211	hold your horses	horse	I				X	X	X			

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212	eat like a horse	horse	S			X		X				
213	work like a horse	horse	S					X				
214	drive a coach and horses through something	horse	B	BrE		X	X					
215	You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink.	horse	P			X	X			X		
215	you can lead a horse to water (but you can't make it drink)	horse	P/I				X					
216	change horses (in midstream)	horse	I			X	X					
216	switch horses (in midstream)	horse	I			X						
217	sb gets on his/her high horse	horse	I				X					
217	get on your high horse	horse	I			X						
217	get off your high horse	horse	I				X					
217	come/get down off your high horse	horse	I			X						
218	horses for courses	horse	I	BrE		X	X					
219	be on your hobbyhorse	horse	I	BrE			X					
220	a one-horse race	horse	I	esp. BrE		X	X					
221	from the horse's mouth	horse	I			X						
221	(straight) from the horse's mouth	horse	I				X					
222	don't/never look a gift horse in the mouth	horse	P				X					
222	look a gift horse in the mouth	horse	I			X						
223	a stalking horse (1)	horse	I			X						
223	a stalking horse (2)	horse	I			X	X					
224	strong as a horse	horse	S			X	X					
224	(strong as a bull)	bull	S			X	X					
224	(strong as an ox)	ox	S			X	X					
225	ride two horses (at the same time)	horse	I	BrE			X					
225	ride two horses at the same time/at once	horse	I	BrE		X						
226	wild horses would not drag sb (to sth)	horse	I			X	X					
226	wild horses could not drag sb	horse	I				X					
226	(wild horses would/could not make, force etc sb)	horse	I				X					
226	wild horses (would not make sb do sth)	horse	I			X						
227	a one-horse town	horse	I			X	X					
228	run with the hare and hunt with the hounds	hare, hound	I	BrE		X						
229	kangaroos/roos in your top paddock	kangaroo	I	esp. AusE		X						
230	have kittens	kitten	I	BrE		X	X					
231	mutton dressed as lamb	lamb	S	BrE		X	X					
231	mutton dressed up as a lamb	lamb	S	BrE		X						
232	go like a lamb to the slaughter	lamb	S				X					
232	like lambs to the slaughter	lamb	S			X						
232	like sheep to be the slaughter	sheep	S			X						
233	(as) quiet as a lamb	lamb	S			X	X					
234	gentle as a lamb	lamb	S			X						
235	do sth in two shakes (of a lamb's tail)	lamb	I				X					
235	in two shakes of a lamb's tail	lamb	I			X						
236	like a lamb	lamb	S			X						
237	up with the lark	lark	I		X	X						
237	be up with the lark	lark	I				X					
238	blow/sod this for a lark	lark	I				X					
239	A leopard can't change its spots.	leopard	P				X			X		
239	a leopard does not/doesn't change its spots	leopard	P			X	X					
240	the lion's share (of sth)	lion	I		X	X	X					
241	brave/beard the lion in his den	lion	I				X					
242	in/into the lion's den	lion	I				X					
243	put your head in/into the lion's mouth	lion	I			X	X					
243	walk into the lion's den	lion	I			X						
243	Daniel in the lion's den	lion	I			X						
244	fight/battle/defend like a lion	lion	S			X						
245	throw sb to the lions/wolves	lion, wolf	I			X	X					
246	a mare's nest	mare	I				X					
247	Don't make a mountain of a molehill.	mole	P						X			
247	make a mountain out of a molehill	mole	I			X	X					
247	(turn molehills into mountains)	mole	I				X					

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248	have a monkey on your back	monkey	I	esp. AmE		X						
248	a/the monkey on sb's back	monkey	I				X					
248	get the monkey off your back	monkey	I			X						
249	(It's) cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey	monkey	I	BrE		X						
249	brass monkey weather	monkey	I	BrE		X						
249	it's brass monkeys	monkey	I	BrE			X					
250	monkey business	monkey	I			X	X					
251	a cartload/barrel (load) of monkeys	monkey	I	BrE		X						
252	speak/talk to the organ grinder, not his monkey	monkey	I	BrE			X					
253	the organ grinder's monkey	monkey	I	BrE		X						
254	I don't give a monkey's	monkey	I	BrE			X					
254	not give a monkey's (cuss)	monkey	I	BrE		X						
254	(I don't give monkey's shit/bum/fart etc)	monkey	I				X					
255	throw a monkey wrench into sth	monkey	I	AmE			X					
255	throw a monkey wrench into the works	monkey	I	AmE		X						
256	if you pay peanuts, you get monkeys	monkey	I	BrE		X	X					
257	make a monkey (out) of sb/someone	monkey	I			X	X					
258	like a moth to a flame	moth	S			X						
259	poor as a church mouse	mouse	S			X						
260	quiet as a mouse	mouse	S			X	X					
261	be pissed as a newt	newt	S	BrE			X					
261	pissed as a newt	newt	S	BrE		X						
262	a night owl	owl	I			X	X					
263	the world is your oyster	oyster	I			X	X					
264	parrot fashion	parrot	I			X						
265	sick as a parrot	parrot	S	BrE		X	X					
266	pissed as a parrot	parrot	S			X						
267	rise like a phoenix from the ashes	phoenix	S				X					
268	to buy a pig in a poke	pig	I				X				X	
268	a pig in a poke	pig	I			X						
269	in a pig's eye!	pig	I	AmE			X					
270	make a pig's ear of something	pig	I	BrE		X	X					
270	something is a pig's ear	pig	I	BrE		X						
271	eat like a pig	pig	S			X						
272	pigs might fly	pig	I	BrE		X						
272	when pigs fly	pig	I	BrE		X						
272	a pig flying by	pig	I	BrE		X						
273	be sick as a pig	pig	S	BrE			X					
273	sick as a pig	pig	S	BrE		X						
274	like a greased pig	pig	S	esp. AmE		X						
275	make a pig of yourself	pig	I			X						
276	squeal/scream/sound like a stuck pig	pig	S			X						
277	sweat like a pig	pig	S			X						
278	to be piggy in the middle	piggy	I	BrE			X					X
278	the piggy in the middle	piggy	I	BrE		X						
279	play possum	possum	I			X	X					
280	come the raw prawn	prawn	I			X						
281	be sold a pup	pup	I				X					
282	pull a rabbit out of the hat	rabbit	I			X						
283	to smell a rat	rat	I		X	X	X	X		X		
284	look like a drowned rat	rat	S			X						
285	the rat race	rat	I			X	X					
286	go down like a rat sandwich	rat	S				X					
286	(be as popular, welcome etc as a rat sandwich)	rat	S				X					
287	like a rat leaving a sinking ship	rat	S			X						
288	be packed like sardines	sardine	S			X	X					
288	be packed(/crammed/squeezed etc) like sardines	sardine	S				X					
289	the black sheep of the family	sheep	I			X	X					
289	black sheep in the family	sheep	I					X				
289	the black sheep	sheep	I			X						

Phrase #	Phrase	Animal	Phrase type	Regional variety	BBC	CCID	LID	REK	WE1	WE2	WE3	WE4
290	make sheep's eyes	sheep	I	BrE		X	X					
291	separate the sheep from the goats	sheep, goat	I			X	X	X				
291	sort out the sheep from the goats	sheep, goat	I			X						
292	might as well be hanged/hung for a sheep as (for) a lamb	sheep, lamb	P	BrE			X					
292	might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb	sheep, lamb	P	BrE		X						
293	drunk as a skunk	skunk	S			X	X					
293	drunk as a coot	coot	S			X						
294	a snake oil salesman	snake	I	esp. AmE		X						
294	snake oil	snake	I	esp. AmE		X	X					
295	a snake in the grass	snake	I			X	X					
296	you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear	sow	P			X						
296	make a silk purse out of a sow's ear	sow	I				X					
296	make/turn a sow's ear into a silk purse	sow	I				X					
297	a sprat to catch a mackerel	sprat, mackere	I				X	X				
298	a stag night	stag	I		X							
299	one swallow doesn't make a summer	swallow	P			X	X					
300	cast pearls before swine	swine	I			X	X					
301	be a paper tiger	tiger	I			X	X					
302	go cold turkey	turkey	I				X	X				
303	like turkeys voting for Christmas	turkey	S	BrE		X	X					
304	talk turkey	turkey	I	AmE		X	X	X				
305	a turkey shoot	turkey	I			X						
306	turn turtle	turtle	I	BrE		X	X					
307	have a whale of a time	whale	I			X	X					
308	keep the wolf from the door	wolf	I		X	X	X					
309	be a wolf in sheep's clothing	wolf, sheep	I				X					
309	a wolf in sheep's clothing	wolf, sheep	I			X		X				
309	a sheep in wolf's clothing	sheep, wolf	I			X						
310	cry wolf	wolf	I			X	X					
311	the big bad wolf	wolf	I				X					
312	a lone wolf	wolf	I			X	X					
313	a can of worms	worm	I			X	X					
313	to open a can of worms	worm	I						X			
313	a bag of worms	worm	I			X						
314	a worm's-eye view (of sth)	worm	I			X	X					
315	the worm turns	worm	P			X	X					

Phrase:

() = optional words or less frequent forms

/ = alternative words

(1), (2) = different senses of the same expression

Regional variety:

AmE = American English

BrE = British English

esp. AmE = the phrase is used more often in American English than in British English

esp. BrE = the phrase is used more often in British English than in American English

AusE = Australian English

Sources:

BBC = BBC World Service

CCID = *Collins Cobuild Idioms Dictionary* (2011)

LID = *Longman Idioms Dictionary* (2000)

REK = *101 idiomia in English* (1998)

WE1 = *A bird in the hand is worth kymmenen oksalla* (2002)

WE2 = *Parempi pyy pivossa kuin two in the bush* (2004)

WE3 = *It's not my heiniä* (2006)

WE4 = *Se ei ole minun cup of tea* (2008)

Phrase types:

B = binominal

I = idiom

P = proverb

S = simile

Appendix 2: A classification of the animal constituents

(the total number of the members in each category is indicated in parentheses)

Domesticated animals (31)

bull, calf, camel, cat, chicken, cock, cow, dog, donkey, drake, duck, duckling, goat, goose, guinea pig, hamster, hen, horse, hound, kitten, lamb, mare, ox, pig, piggy, pony, pup, sheep, sow, swine, turkey

Wild animals (25)

ape, bat, bear, beaver, bunny, coon, deer, elephant, fox, hare, hog, kangaroo, leopard, lion, mole, monkey, mouse, possum, rabbit, rat, skunk, stag, tiger, whale, wolf

Birds (23)

albatross, canary, catbird, chicken, cock, coot, crow, cuckoo, dickybird, duck, duckling, eagle, gander, goose, halcyon, hawk, hen, lark, owl, parrot, pigeon, swallow, turkey

Insects and parasites (12)

ant, bedbug, bee, bug, butterfly, flea, fly, gnat, grasshopper, hornet, moth, worm

Fish and crustaceans (10)

clam, cockle, eel, goldfish, herring, mackerel, oyster, prawn, sardine, sprat

Hyperonyms (8)

animal, beast, bird, cattle, creature, dickybird, fish, fowl

Reptiles and amphibians (5)

crocodile, frog, newt, snake, turtle

Extinct animals and imaginary animals (3)

dodo, dragon, phoenix