LIVING LANGUAGE

NATURE CALLS

Rosemary Pearson-Chen

FEDERAL PUBLICATIONS
Singapore • Kuala Lumpur • Hong Kong

LIVING LANGUAGE

NATURE CALLS

Rosemary Pearson-Chen

Illustrations by R. Karmakar

FEDERAL PUBLICATIONS
Singapore · Kuala Lumpur · Hong Kong

世界图书出版公司
北京·广州·上海·西安

Times Jurong
2 Jurong Port Road
Singapore 2261

First Published 1985

ISBN 9971 4 0309 9

Reprint authorized by Federal Publications (S) Pte Ltd.
Reprinted by World Publishing Corporation, Beijing, 1993
Licensed for sale in China only
ISBN 7 - 5062 - 1486 - 5

for my children
TAMARA, ROBERT, TIMOTHY AND JONATHAN

Whose delight in discovery of new words
and their meanings,
gives constant, refreshing insights
into the world of communication.

There is 'more to this book than meets the eye'.
so 'don't judge the book by its cover'.
I hope my readers will enjoy 'marking my words'
as much as I enjoyed recording the 'written word'.

CONTENTS

1 General Introduction

How confusing English must be for non-native speakers. Words cannot be 'taken at face value', or 'word by word'. Each group, phrase or idiom subtly changes the meaning, and only experience teaches the difference. Every area has its unique expressions or colloquialisms. Their phraseology, approved by usage, becomes in time an accepted idiom.

The word 'idiom' comes from the Greek *idiomatos*, meaning 'private property' and via French *idioomai* meaning 'to make one's own'. These 'private jokes' are now 'public domain' and their beginnings are often obscure. Many are based on legend and 'word of mouth' stories, coloured, no doubt by countless story-tellers.

This book is not an authority on linguistics. It is a collection of favourite idioms used in context, so readers can 'get the feel' of the language. Included are word derivations and interesting stories behind the formation of some well-used expressions. Even many who consider English their 'mother tongue' are not aware of how these idioms they take for granted have evolved. For those learning English as a second language, once you know the background to an expression, it is easy to remember and use in context — even if it is not logical or grammatically correct!

LIVING LANGUAGE is by no means a complete reference; neither does it include every idiom. I hope to inject a little fun into the language by 'casting light' on

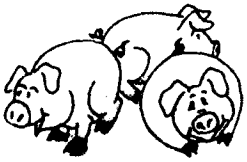
some 'grey areas', and provoke thought and interest. For English is an international language that developed over many centuries and was influenced by diverse nations, borrowing freely from both European and Eastern influences.

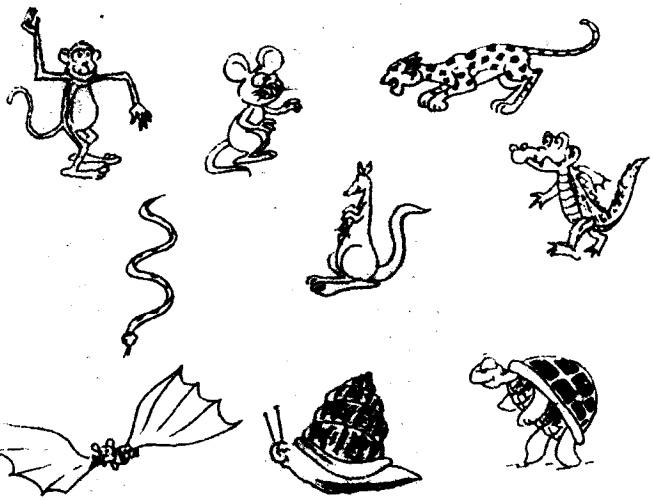
While dwellers in tropical lands have never experienced the 'first buds of Spring', or 'locking the stable door after the horse has bolted', and have never seen 'a bed of roses', or eaten 'a ploughman's lunch', many idioms offer no point of reference. But these local speakers of our quaint 'mongrel' language have some advantages. As the West moved East, 'the ham in the sandwich' and 'apple-pie order' took on new meaning. Asians are quite at home with *matahari*, *mandarin*, *durian*, *kimono*, *kampong*, *attap*, *mascara*, *coconut*, *cheongsam*, *chow*, *typhoon*, and *bamboo* among other concepts in our vocabulary.

From only 26 letters in our alphabet, we have evolved a million words, and an infinite number of meanings. We use only 45 basic units of sound in English (compared with 13 in some Pacific Islands — a smaller range of sounds than dolphins use). Today's world contains over 3,000 different languages. While isolation preserves purity of a language, it is a barrier to communication which is the sole purpose of language. Whether as formal discussions, lectures, arguments, verbal banter or simple conversation, words touch and move a listener or reader, for the written word also 'speaks' to its audience.

Dignity in language gives an air of authority. Truly, 'the pen is mightier than the sword'. As Eliza Doolittle discovered in *Pygmalion*, power and prestige did not

come from money, but from correct, beautiful speech. Language skills took her 'from the guttermost to the uttermost'. 'Take heart', dear reader. Only 45 simple animal sounds can produce sweet success in our language. Much of our learning is enjoyable — after all, we learn to laugh long before mastering any words.





Animal Language

Introduction

Imagine an animal 'as tall as a giraffe', moving 'as slowly as a tortoise', with 'eyes like a ferret', and equipped with the 'memory of an elephant'. This beast is 'as slippery as an eel', and 'as quiet as a mouse'. It has 'skin as tough as a rhinoceros,' the raucous 'laugh of a hyena', and produces 'crocodile tears'. Every expression here conjures up an image, a word picture in your mind. Of course the combination is ridiculous, but it does demonstrate how we enrich our language by making comparisons with creatures whose characteristics we identify. Hence, let's trek into the jungle and examine some of the beasts which have contributed to our language.

Barnyard Banter

Man has bred domestic animals for his own use. By crossing carefully chosen animals he could gradually exaggerate certain qualities of behaviour and appearance.

Before the age of mechanization, horses were indispensable. They were the chief beasts of burden, and needed for war; thus great care was taken in their breeding.

Dogs were probably the first creatures domesticated and bred by man. Their close relationship with people dates from pre-historic times. Bronze Age men had Alsatians 6,000 years ago, while the Pharoahs of Egypt used greyhounds for coursing 5,000 years ago.

As the population grew during the 18th and 19th centuries, more food was needed and improved agricultural methods were employed. In Britain, fields became enclosed for keeping cattle and sheep, goats and pigs. Man was then able to control the breeding of his livestock.

Chickens (probably descended from the red Jungle Fowl of India), came to Britain 2,000 years ago. Breeding designed to increase egg production is quite recent. Formerly the birds were kept for meat and cock-fighting 'sport'.

The pig has changed through breeding. Wild pigs have their weight concentrated on their muscular shoulders, like the domesticated pigs 3 centuries ago. As a result of breeding, porkers today have most of their weight in the middle- and hind-quarters of their bodies.

Camels and elephants in the tropics, yaks and reindeer in the Arctic and many other animals have been enlisted to benefit man.

The following series will introduce the livestock language of temperate country creatures.

A Lot of Bull

Cows are raised on dairy farms for their milk products or on ranches for their meat and hides. Dairy cows are 'milked' daily, morning and evening; and the milk can be made into cream, butter and cheese products. As temperate climate creatures, cows need good pastures in warm weather, and shelter and dried food in winter.

Cows must be washed and brushed before 'milking'. This process is mainly mechanized on commercial farms these days, but in smaller farms, cows are still milked by hand. Baby cows are 'calves' until their first birthday after which they are known as 'heifers'. At this stage they may be killed for 'veal', or live to become 'stud bulls' and 'milking cows'.

The 'cow' is a female which has 'calved'. (This is not to be mistaken for carving the Sunday roast, which may well be beef.) 'A cow' is also a derogatory description for a coarse, rough woman. 'A cow of a situation' is rather unpleasant to face.

'A cowbell' is a percussion instrument hanging round the necks of cows in the Swiss Alps where they still roam free, and the bell tells the 'cowherd' their

whereabouts. A 'cowboy' is in charge of grazing cattle on a ranch which is usually a vast, infertile area. A 'cow-catcher' is a gruesome apparatus fixed on the front of locomotive to remove straying cattle and other obstructions from the railway line.

The 'bull' is an uncastrated male — and he really is a horned bully. 'A bull in a china-shop' is a clumsy destroyer of property. 'To take the bull by the horns' is to meet a difficulty boldly. 'A bull in the market' is one who buys, hoping to sell later at a higher price — (that is a bear). Thus a 'bull market' describes rising prices.

When we took a child through the Sabah jungle, she asked, "Why did the buffalo leave their Christmas puddings on the road?" When Singapore children visited their New Zealand grandparents, we saw how much we took for granted their understanding of basic concepts. Granny served rolled roast beef. Eight-year-old fiddled with his food, looking most unhappy. When asked why, he blurted out, "I never knew that your cows were so miserable that they are tied together with string, and have sticks for bones."

Another child was overheard explaining to his little brother that "Cream costs more than milk because it is harder for a cow to sit on a cream bottle than on a milk-bottle". They were never able to figure out Grandpa's riddle "Why is the milk of a brown cow white when it always eats green grass?"

For people who have grown up in the city and never lived on a farm, the language of the barnyard is confusing. When children think milk only comes in cartons from the supermarket or tinned in powder form, the idea of an animal producing this nourishing

food is rather far-fetched. Likewise, 'frozen beef' conjures up pictures of frigid cows, and 'airflown beef' was once explained to me as "cows with wings — you know, like the one that jumped over the moon".

Taurus the bull has a place in the zodiac. 'The golden calf' is an object of worship and wealth from Old Testament times of pagan worship.

Oxen are powerful, rough beasts. To be 'as strong as an ox' refers to great strength physically. Oxen are popular in ox-tail stew and ox-tongue jelly. But if one is described as ox-like, it is hardly complimentary, as one is considered stupid and slow. 'Bovine' likewise is an insulting term, but 'Bovril', a beef extract, makes a delicious drink.

'Bullied beef' and 'corned beef' are salted and preserved. (The latter is not to be confused with corn-fed veal.) 'Bulls-eye' means right on target, especially in archery and rifle shooting. 'A bull at the gate' is a direct attack. A 'bull-dog' is a brave and strong beast, while a 'bulldozer' is a powerful tractor with a broad vertical blade for clearing the ground. Thus, when one 'bulldozes into a situation', one goes forcibly to intimidate or coerce. 'Bull-fighting' is a Spanish 'sport' of baiting and killing bulls. 'Bull' can refer to insincere words, and a 'load of bull' is utter rubbish (like those Christmas puddings referred to earlier).

'Beef' is a nourishing red meat, and makes juicy steaks and sausages; sirloin, rump and topside. 'Beef on the hoof' refers to cattle awaiting the fate of being slaughtered to feed the sausage machine. 'Beefeaters' are soldiers who still wear quaint ceremonial uniforms and guard the Crown Jewels in the Tower of London;

and they are still beef eaters. 'Beefy' describes someone solid and muscular, while 'putting on the beef' is a tactful way of saying 'You're getting fat'.

The 'male bull', 'female cow' and 'young calf' are terms used for whales, seals and elephants as well as cattle. Buffalo and bison are members of the ox family. Hide as tough as that of a buffalo means 'thick skin', untouchable.

Yes, cattle have certainly 'beefed up' the vocabulary. We must 'bulldoze' our way through this 'cow' of a language, and 'cream off' the most useful expressions.

(Ox tail-note) . . . According to London's *Sunday Times*, just as the newly converted troopship QE2 was about to set sail for the South Atlantic, thousands of kilos of Argentinian beef were found in the ship's deep freeze. Officials sent the offending meat to a local butcher, who chopped it up and re-labelled it 'British Mince' in case patriotic troops refused to eat it . . .

So 'What's the beef?' There's nothing like 'mincing your words!'

Bleating Sheep

We are familiar with the gentle sheep from nursery rhyme days of *Mary had a little lamb*, and *Little Bo-Peep has lost her sheep*, and *Baa baa black sheep*. Most families have someone that causes them shame and embarrassment — he is known as 'the black sheep of the family'. Perhaps you would like to disown him — 'separate the sheep from the goats'.

Showing no initiative or independence is being 'as silly as a sheep', and it may get you into real trouble. In such a case, enjoy the situation, for 'you may as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb'.

Beware of dangerous people who pretend to be harmless. Really, they are 'like wolves in sheep's clothing'. They are 'crooks' (not sheep's crooks, which are crooked sticks used for 'crooking' a sheep from danger by hooking it back onto safe ground). This is the work of a tender-hearted tender-of-sheep, known as a 'sheep-herd', lazily shortened to 'shepherd'.

When warm weather comes, sheep are sent to the 'shearer', where they are 'fleeced' (like tourists conned into giving up their valuables). The 'fleece' is long, soft wool, known as 'laine'. Oil extracted from the wool is 'lanolin' used in skin creams.

When someone has had a 'short back and sides' haircut, he looks rather thin and strange, and might be described as a 'shorn sheep'. The poor 'shorn sheep' may look at you rather balefully, 'making sheeps-eyes', feeling bashful and 'sheepish'. If you make a big fuss over nothing, you have 'a great cry and little wool'. But this is 'mere kids-stuff', and 'you're trying to pull the wool over my eyes'.

I Ewes and Rammers

'Lambs' become 'hoggets' after their first birthday, and those who survive the butcher's knife are called 'mutton'