

When humans ape animals

by Sabine Eiche

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Have you ever capered or felt capricious? Let me rephrase the question. Have you ever taken little hops and leaps and acted friskily? Then you've capered. Have you ever felt like doing something whimsical, just for the fun of it? Then you've felt capricious.

Frisking and frolicking is what young goats do all the time, so it's not surprising that words for similar human behaviour derive from the Latin for goat, "capra."

The animal kingdom has enriched our vocabulary in myriad ways. Sometimes a distinctive characteristic is transposed from animal to human, such as the motion of ducks and geese when they walk, swaying from side to side on their short legs. We say they waddle, and the same word describes infants taking their first, unsteady steps.

When hens sit on their eggs to hatch them, they're brooding. We brood as well, when we're thinking something over, when we're hatching something in our mind.

We also have words that employ the name of the animal for a human action copying its manner. If a person is snaking, he's moving stealthily and sinuously. Someone who squirrels things away is hiding them for future use, as a squirrel does with nuts. To ferret something out means to bring something to light, in the manner of the ferret, which flushes rabbits and rats out of their hideaways.

Apes imitate humans, thus the verb to ape is used when a person mimics someone else. We say we beetle our brows when we are scowling, because our facial expression is suggestive of a beetle. Wodehouse, author of the Jeeves and Bertie Wooster stories, popularized the phrase to beetle off, signifying to hurry away.

The verb to lionize is used in a slightly different way. It means to treat someone as a celebrity, to adulate them, not because that's what lions do, but because the lion is considered the king of the beasts.

Occasionally body parts of animals are used to describe human actions. A person tailing someone is following them secretly. Policemen tail suspects; paparazzi tail celebrities. Many animals have claws where we have toes and fingers. If a person is clawing at something, he is using his fingers to tear or scratch at something or attempting to grasp a thing, usually in a desperate way. And to paw someone or something implies a certain clumsiness of the action.

The sounds that animals make have supplied a range of words to apply to human vocalizations. We, too, can grunt, chirp or purr words, depending on our mood. Many of these words are onomatopoeic – their pronunciation imitates the sound they define, such as quack and buzz.

Often the word implies a particular behaviour associated with the animal. When a person bleats, he's crying plaintively, like a calf or sheep. To cluck means to express concern – a hen clucks to call her chicks to safety. And when someone crows, he is boasting or giving a shout of joy, suggestive of the rooster puffing up his breast to crow cockadoodledoo at sunrise.

Now, if you were to ask me why a rooster crows but a crow caws, I would squeak "I don't know."