

**“A BIRD IN THE HAND”: DIACHRONIC EVOLUTION OF ORNITHOLOGICAL METAPHORS IN ENGLISH PHRASEOLOGY**

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**Abstract.** This article examines the evaluative semantics of ornithological phraseological units in the English language across the Middle English and New English periods. Based on a corpus of historical phraseological units extracted from standard dictionaries of proverbs and phrases (WDP, ODP, EP), the study identifies a shift from a predominantly ameliorative conceptualisation of the bird in Middle English to an ambivalent, value-marked representation in New English. Positive features such as “caution” and “moderation” persist throughout both periods, while New English introduces new ameliorative traits (“preferability”, “diligence”, “solidarity”, “love of home”) alongside a marked increase in pejorative features (“conditionality/determinism”, “stupidity”, “laziness”, “impossibility”, “self-love”). The analysis employs the notions of basic models (underlying human-oriented propositions) and figurative models (ornithologically-coded scenarios) to reveal how bird imagery serves as a productive cognitive resource for evaluating human behaviour, social norms, and existential limitations. The findings contribute to cognitive phraseology, historical semantics, and cultural linguistics, demonstrating that the English bird concept evolves from a sacralised, uniformly positive symbol to a versatile evaluative tool reflecting early modern social and economic transformations.

**Keywords:** ornithological metaphors, phraseological units, English historical linguistics, evaluative semantics, cognitive phraseology, Middle English, New English, bird concept.

Cross-linguistic research has repeatedly shown that animal names constitute a fertile domain for metaphorical and metonymic transfers in the evaluation of human traits (Rezanova, 2003; Lakoff & Turner, 1989). Among animals, birds occupy a special position due to their extraordinary abilities – flight, song, and plumage – which, from an anthropocentric perspective, invite sacralisation and ambivalent valuation. In the English linguistic picture of the world, the concept BIRD is fundamentally ambivalent, yet earlier historical stages have been claimed to display a predominance of ameliorative meanings (Rezanova, 2003, p. 50). The present article tests this claim by conducting a systematic diachronic analysis of English ornithological phraseological units from the Middle English (ME; c. 1150–1500) and New English (NE; c. 1500–1900) periods.

Using a corpus of phraseological units extracted from standard historical dictionaries of proverbs (WDP – Wilson’s Dictionary of Proverbs; ODP – Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs; EP – English Proverbs, mainly Tilley’s collection), the study demonstrates that while the Middle English period exhibits a narrow but consistently positive set of evaluations (“caution”, “moderation”) with no pejorative phraseological units, the New English period drastically expands the semantic spectrum. New English preserves the positive features, adds new ameliorative traits (diligence, preference, solidarity, home-attachment), and simultaneously introduces a wide range of pejorative features (conditionality, stupidity, laziness, impossibility, self-love). This ambivalence reflects both the cognitive complexity of the bird image and

changing social ideologies, particularly the rise of capitalist competition and individualism in early modern England.

Phraseological units were extracted from three authoritative sources: Wilson's Dictionary of Proverbs (WDP), the Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs (ODP), and Tilley's English Proverbs (EP). Each phraseological unit was assigned to Middle English (1450–1500) or New English (1500–1882) based on the earliest attested date provided. Only phraseological units where the zoonym bird (or specific bird species generalisable to "bird") functioned as a key component were included. Evaluative features were identified through contextual analysis of the proverb's use.

Following Rezanova (2003), features were classified as ameliorative (positive) or pejorative (negative). Within each, thematic categories (e.g., caution, moderation, diligence, stupidity, laziness) were induced from recurrent semantic domains. The syntactic role of the bird image (subject, object, or patientive element) was also coded.

### **Middle English Period**

**Positive features.** No phraseological units with the concept BIRD were found in the ME corpus. Two positive features predominate:

- **Caution:** old birds are not caught with chaff (1481, WDP). The bird is the object of manipulation; the figurative model ("not every bird can be caught with bait") encodes the basic model of experiential wariness.

- **Moderation:** a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush (1450, WDP). Borrowed from French in the 13th century, this phraseological unit realises the basic model "better fewer, but better" through the figurative contrast between captured and free game.

Both features involve patientive or situational models where the bird is an object or a passive referent. Middle English phraseological units are few in number but uniformly positive.

### **New English Period**

#### **Positive evaluative features**

NE inherits and expands the positive domain:

- **Caution** (continuing from Middle English): in vain the net is spread in sight of a bird (1581, WDP); he builds cages for oxen to keep birds in (1678, WDP). The latter ironically adds "excessive caution is harmful", showing metapragmatic refinement.

- **Moderation:** better an egg today than a hen tomorrow (1611, WDP) – the same basic model as the "bird in hand" proverb.

- **Preferability:** of all birds give me mutton (1732, WDP); that is the bird that I would catch (1732, WDP) – the bird as desired object or marriage partner.

- **Diligence:** the early bird catches the worm (1605, WDP); the early bird gets the late one's breakfast (1882, WDP). The latter reflects capitalist competition: the worm becomes a zero-sum resource.

- **Love of home:** every bird likes its own nest best (1611, WDP) – nest as home, bird as active subject.

- **Solidarity:** birds of a feather flock together (1545, WDP) – attributed to Homer, this phraseological unit objectifies social homophily.

Positive New English phraseological units exhibit both agentive (bird as subject: diligence, solidarity, love of home) and situational/patientive (bird as object: preferability, moderation) models.

#### **Negative evaluative features**

Unlike Middle English, New English abounds in pejorative phraseological units:

- **Conditionality / determinism** (ambivalent to negative): as the bird is, such is the nest (1611, WDP); the bird is known by his song, a man by his words (1659, ODP); ill bird lays

an ill egg (1586, WDP); fine feathers make fine birds (1592, WDP). These encode causal determinism and can be used critically (e.g., judging by appearance, inherited bad traits).

- **Stupidity / ineffectiveness:** to fright a bird is not the way to catch her (1633, WDP) – warning against counterproductive actions; he has brought up a bird to pick out his own eyes (1639, WDP) – self-inflicted harm.

- **Laziness:** as good to be an addled egg as an idle bird (1581, WDP); the bird that can sing and won't sing must be made to sing (1678, WDP) – censure of indolence.

- **Impossibility:** there are no birds in last year's nest (1620, EP); a bird never flew on one wing (1670, EP) – the past cannot be recovered; one cannot live without essential means.

- **Self-love / narcissism:** each bird loves to hear himself sing (1659, WDP) – dominance in conversation is criticised.

Pejorative models distribute across subject, object, and patientive roles, with no single type dominating.

The Middle English absence of pejorative bird phraseological units supports Rezanova's (2003) observation of a predominantly ameliorative concept in early English. The bird's sacralised status – derived from its extraordinary flight and song – likely inhibited negative metaphorical extensions. However, the New English explosion of pejorative uses suggests a progressive “disenchantment” or pragmatic diversification. The bird becomes a flexible evaluative resource, applicable to human flaws (stupidity, laziness, narcissism) and existential constraints (impossibility, determinism).

The appearance of the early bird gets the late one's breakfast (1882) explicitly references competitive capitalism: diligence is not merely rewarded but becomes a zero-sum race. Likewise, the rise of individualistic social norms may explain pejorative phraseological units like each bird loves to hear himself sing (self-love as social vice). The deterministic phraseological units (ill bird lays an ill egg, fine feathers make fine birds) reflect early modern concerns with hereditary character and outward display – themes central to Protestant ethics and the critique of aristocratic privilege.

The data confirm that the basic models are consistently anthropocentric (e.g., “actions have consequences”, “past cannot be changed”, “people seek similar others”), while figurative models borrow from bird ethology (flocking, nesting, singing, foraging). This mapping is not arbitrary; it exploits shared features between human sociality and avian behaviour. The shift from Middle English to New English lies not in the basic models but in the expansion of which basic models are expressed through bird imagery. Caution and moderation remain, but are joined by competition, homophily, determinism, and impossibility – a broader existential repertoire.

The study relies on dictionary attestations; frequency data and contextual usage in literary or colloquial corpora would strengthen claims about actual evaluative valence. Additionally, cross-linguistic comparison (e.g., with Slavic or Romance languages) could reveal whether the English trajectory is unique or universal. Finally, finer-grained periodisation within New English (Early New English vs. Late New English) might isolate the impact of industrialisation and urbanisation.

This diachronic analysis of English ornithological phraseology demonstrates that the concept BIRD evolves from a uniformly positive, sacralised symbol in Middle English to a richly ambivalent evaluative tool in New English. While positive features such as caution and moderation persist, the New English period introduces novel positive traits (diligence, solidarity, preferability, love of home) and, crucially, a wide array of negative features (conditionality, stupidity, laziness, impossibility, self-love). These changes reflect both cognitive elaboration – the bird becomes a productive source domain for a greater variety of basic human models – and socio-historical shifts, notably the rise of competitive capitalism and individualistic norms. The

article thus contributes to cognitive historical linguistics by showing how a single conceptual domain can undergo profound evaluative reorganisation across centuries, turning a sacred creature into a mirror of human virtues and vices.

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