

Semantic associations (II)

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Cats, monkeys, insects, drunkenness and black mood

Michel Masson (2008)

Semantic parallelisms

- In several European languages lexical items meaning 'cat' also designate 'monkey', 'drunkard' (or 'drunkenness'), several 'insects' and some supernatural creatures

Cat and monkey

- Italian *gattomammone* ‘monkey’
- Spanish *gatopaul* ‘long-tailed monkey’
- German *Meerkatze* ‘female monkey’
- Occitan *cat-mimoun, gaminou* ‘monkey’

- Prelinnéan classification of species
(anthropoid, hairy animals)

1. Monkey and drunkenness

- Lexical associations e.g. in Occitan, Italian (*monno*), Spanish (*mona, moña*).
- Already in the Talmud

1. Monkey and drunkenness

- Would a monkey be a prototypical drunkard? NO!
- In wild they do not drink alcohol
- No mention of monkeys liking wine in the medieval zoological literature
- Pliny mentions that a trick to catch them is to make them drunk
- If drunk they grow fidgety, which they are reported to be by nature

1. Monkey and drunkenness

- Nothing proves that they prefer alcohol to anything else, sufficiently to give rise to metaphores.
- Look for another reason!

1. Cat and drunkenness

- Lexical associations in Occitan, Catalan, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese
- It's well known that cats hate alcohol!
- Look for another explanation!

2. Cats, monkeys and insects

- Insects to be understood in the prelinnéan classification!
- Include worms, scorpions, small snakes, etc. (cf. Bible *šéreš* ‘creeping things’)
- Cf. English vermin (< French *ver* ‘worm’): fleas, cockroaches, mice

2. Cats, monkeys and insects

- Numerous 'insect' names derive from 'cat' and 'monkey' in Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, English.
- Scholopendra, worm, moth, leech, silk worm, glow worm, caterpillar (< Fr. *chate pelose* 'hairy cat'), mayfly, louse, cockroach, bug, maybug

3. Cat, monkey and black mood

- In Occitan, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, words and expressions designating melancholy, queerness, gloomy mood are derived from the ‘cat’ and ‘monkey’ (and the insect words derived from them, cf. English ‘to be lousy’)

4. Cat, monkey, insects and dreadful creatures

- In Occitan, French, Spanish, Italian, Catalan several lexemes designating dreadful creatures derive from ‘cat’, ‘monkey’, ‘insects’
- French & Occitan *marmuque* ‘ghost’, *marmauche*, *marmote* ‘bug’, *marmaute*, *marmote* ‘monkey’

Cultural and historical explanation

- 4. Cat, monkey, insects and dreadful creatures:
- Supernatural forces are at work
- Obvious in words designating the devil, the bugbear, the ghost (i.e. what's left of life after death)
- The force can be embodied in an animal

Cultural and historical explanation

- Supernatural Force embodied in cats and monkeys is historically documented since the Middle Ages:
 - Eerie reputation of cats is notorious (Hue 1982)
 - Monkeys have long been considered as devilish creatures (Janson 1952)
- Insects in contact with earth and rot are close to the world of the death

Cultural and historical explanation

- Until recently, mental disturbances or simple oddness were perceived and conceived as forms of possession
- Expressions where cat/monkey is incorporated, ingested into oneself
- Develish creatures > drunkenness = state of possession

Cultural and historical explanation

- Drunkenness interpreted in the same way. Cf. expressions with ‘cat’ and ‘monkey’ for ‘to be plastered’:
 - German *einen Kater haben* ‘have a tom cat’
 - German *einen Affen haben* ‘have a monkey’
 - Portuguese *tomar o gato* ‘have a cat’
 - Italian *pigliare la gata* ‘take the kitten’
 - Italian *Pigliare la bertuccia, la monna* ‘take the monkey’
 - Spanish *tomar la mona* ‘take the monkey’
 - Occitan *carga la mineto* ‘load the cat’

Cultural and historical explanation

- 3. Cat, monkey, insects and black mood
- The carnival explanation: demoniac character is not only a matter of opinion or myth but also of rite:
- Cat = unfortunate hero of carnival rituals and persecuted (burnt alive on St John's eve, hanged in England)
- No wonder they did not display an inviting composure!

Cultural and historical explanation

- 3. Cat, monkey, insects and black mood
- Monkeys were not tormented (rare and expensive) but exposed to vexations
- In French (old and Picard), Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, lexical items meaning ‘ashamed’, ‘bully’, ‘underdog’, ‘cheat’, ‘to kid’, ‘gullible person’, ‘to submit’ are derived from ‘monkey’
- Old French *la quine mine* ‘subject to the public humiliation (of the charivari)’ (*quin* ‘monkey’)

Cultural and historical explanation

- 3. Cat, monkey, insects and black mood
- Carnival and masks, frightening appearance of participants
- Denominations of insects often based on much bigger creatures (dragon, horse, poney, cow, camel, etc.)
- Facies of insects totally inexpressive with blank eyes like masks
- Entomologists: denominations with *lava* (Latin 'ghost, mask')

Cultural and historical explanation

- 3. Cat, monkey, insects and black mood
- Catalonia: the « Tarasque » is named *la Cuca fera* lit. 'the wild worm'
- Occitan *babouiro*, French *babeoir* 'carnival mask' < 'insect'
- Occitan *far la barbara* 'subject to the public humiliation (of the charivari)'

Conclusion

- The semantic parallelisms stem from the cross-culturally recurrent conception of these living beings as connected to supernatural powers, giving rise to semantic shifts such as ‘scarecrow’, ‘frighten’, ‘devil’ or ‘have the gift of witchcraft’
- They are intimately associated and constitute a network of beliefs linked with the medieval carnival

Conclusion

- Semantic parallelisms do not necessarily function in an isolated way. There are also networks of mutually connected semantic features.
- They allow to reduce the subjectivity of the linguist (etymologist and typologists alike)