

## Why do languages have different sounds for the same animals?

*Farm animals don't oink and moo everywhere around the globe.*

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You may describe this horse's sound as a neigh, but a Swedish speaker may describe it as 'iihaha.' (Photo: Bildagentur Zoonar GmbH/Shutterstock)

If you grew up in an English-speaking country, you likely learned at a young age that cats say “[meow](#),” dogs say “woof,” and roosters say “cock-a-doodle-doo.”

But if you'd grown up in Japan, you would've learned entirely different words for these sounds. In Japan, cats say “nyan,” dogs say “wan,” and roosters say “ko-ke-kok-ko-o.”

But ask a French speaker how these animals sound, and you'll receive another answer entirely. There, cats say “miaou,” dogs say “ouah,” and roosters are known for their early-morning “cocorico.”

How can the same animals sound so different in other countries? The truth is, they don't. While some animals of the same species may sound different depending on where you are, for the most part, it's not the animals that are different — it's us. In fact, the names we assign to these [grunts, cries and snorts](#) reveal more about us than the animals that utter them.

### Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery

There's no consensus among linguists about the origins of [language](#), but according to the bow-wow theory, speech arose from people imitating natural sounds, including those that came from animals. In other words, speech was onomatopoeic.

It's especially easy to see this in some of the verbal representations of animal sounds. For example, the word English speakers often use to describe a snake's sound is “hiss,” and across [numerous other languages](#) — including Danish, Italian, Russian, Spanish and Swedish — it's “sss,” which shares a similar sound pattern. The rooster's crow also maintains a similar pattern of sound across languages. While we say cock-a-doodle-doo, Hungarians say “kukuriku,” the Swedish say “kuckeliku” and the French say “cocorico.”



The English 'cock-a-doodle-doo' is probably the least onomatopoeic word for a rooster's crow. (Photo: Johannes Eder/Shutterstock)

"There's a lot of uniformity between the languages, but every now and again there'll be a surprising difference," said Derek Abbott, a professor at the University of Adelaide in Australia. "For example, the sound a bee makes is 'buzz' in English, and all other languages have some sort of 'zz' sound in there except when we come to Japanese, which is 'boon boon.' Rather odd at first sight, but then the Japanese have no 'z' sound at all in their alphabet."

Abbott says we still don't fully understand why our words for animals' sounds evolved the way they did. He told [The Guardian](#) it's an area of "academic neglect" and noted that the exclusion of these words from some formal dictionaries suggests that they could be perceived as childish and unworthy of academic study.

However, he's begun his own research on the topic and is currently gathering data to add to his already extensive [list of animal sounds in various languages](#). (Check out our visualized taste if it below:)

"When I travel overseas to conferences, I talk to scientists and ask them about animal noises in their language during coffee breaks or at lunchtimes," he said. "These are the words one would write in a cartoon comic for the voice bubble coming out of an animal's mouth. So when I talk to people from other countries, I specifically ask them how it would be written. Then for languages in foreign scripts, I try to transliterate as best I can with English characters."

# Animal sounds in different languages

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## **Cats**

English: **Meow**

French: **Miaou**

Japanese: **Nyan Nyan**

Russian: **Miyau**



## **Frogs**

English: **Croak**

French: **Croa Croa**

Japanese: **Kero Kero**

Russian: **Kva-kva**



## **Pigs**

English: **Oink**

French: **Groin Groin**

Japanese: **Boo Boo**

Russian: **Hrgu Hrgu**



## **Dogs**

English: **Woof Woof**

French: **Ouah Ouah**

Japanese: **Wan Wan**

Russian: **Hav-hav**

A pig doesn't sound the same in Russia. (Graphic: Catie Leary)

### **What our words say about us and our animals**

Abbott says it's too soon to draw conclusions from his data as he's merely in the "stamp-collecting phase," but there are some things that stand out to him. For example, the number of different words a language has to describe an animal's sound — or a lack of such words — can be rather revealing of the speaker's country or culture.

"[English speakers] appear to have far more many types of different dog sounds," he said. "We even differentiate the size of the dog: 'yap yap' (small dog), 'woof woof' (medium dog), 'bow bow' (big dog). Other languages are not so detailed when it comes to dogs."

Why does the English language have such a variety of [dog barks](#)? Possibly because English-speaking countries tend to have the highest rates of dog ownership. In fact, with one dog for every four Americans, the U.S. has the highest dog ownership per capita of any country.



Would you describe these dogs' barks differently because of their size? (Photo: S.Pytel/Shutterstock)

Unsurprisingly, if an animal isn't common in a certain country or important to its culture, the language to describe it reflects that.

"In Australia, [camels](#) have been introduced in the Outback, and so we have 'grumph,'" Abbott said. "I haven't come across any sound for a camel in the U.S. or U.K."

Another interesting finding is how the onomatopoeic sounds for small animals — birds that "tweet" in English and "piip" in Finnish or tiny dogs that "yip" in English and "waf" in Dutch — typically include vowels located in the beginning of the [alphabet](#), depicting the higher pitch of these animals' noises. However, the sounds of larger animals tend to feature vowels from later in the alphabet to represent their lower tones, such as how big dogs "woof" in English and "guF" in Spanish or how cows "moo" in numerous languages.

However, Abbott says one of the most interesting things he's discovered while investigating our words for animal sounds is just how bizarre language can be.

"Perhaps the biggest revelation that this exercise has brought to me is how weird English is," he said. "We do not get to appreciate the weirdness of our own [language](#) until we compare it to others. For example, in English we say 'squawk' for the sound of a big bird, but I get a blank look on people's faces from other countries when I try to explain that. I have not yet found another language with a proper parallel to the word 'squawk.' And we say 'gobble gobble' for a turkey. How crazy is that? That is very unusual compared to other languages that tend to write a sound something along the lines of 'glou glou,' which is much more sane."

Learn more about the names for animal sounds around the world in the video below.



## Bow Wow Meow - Animal Sounds in Different Languages

from **Ke Nguyen** PRO

04:14



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