

Hello. I'm Daniel Brint. Welcome to the Upper Street TODAY language talk, a weekly podcast about English language, expressions, idioms and any other topics of interest inspired by TODAY's subject.

November 23rd is thankful for my dog day. Now this is clearly not a day for everyone. There are those who do not and will never have a dog and those who have a dog, but are not thankful for the privilege. Shame on them. Those of us who had dogs, but no longer do, can join in though, as far as I can tell. And I can express gratitude to our canine dumb friends for enriching the English language.

Not that dog-based phrases and expressions are very flattering to dogs. Considering dogs are 'man's best friend' (something I'll come back to later) many terms have negative connotations. For example, when something has 'gone to the dogs' it means it has deteriorated significantly. So, you might hear someone saying 'that restaurant used to be great but you know what? it's gone to the dogs.' Saying 'it's a dog-eat-dog world' is a way of being realistic about the competitiveness at the basis of human life, but again it's hardly an inspiring message. When it comes to work and effort we can say 'I'm dog tired' or 'I've been working like a dog.' If that last expression rings a bell, it might be because you know the Beatles song A Hard Day's Night. If you've behaved badly, and nobody is talking to you, then you're 'in the doghouse.' So you can see what I mean about not very flattering. Dogs are however used to explain why we are unable to change the way we do things when we're older, hence you 'can't teach an old dog new tricks.' And they are linked to alcohol not only in the image of the brandy barrel and St Bernards, but also in the phrase 'hair of the dog,' meaning to cure a hangover by having a drink. This is supposed to be related to the idea that you could protect yourself from a rabid dog bite by putting a hair of a dog that bit you on your wound.

When we talk about personality and behaviour, things don't improve much. If you're fixated or obsessed, you're 'like a dog with a bone' and if you overdress for a social event, you are 'done up like a dog's dinner.' If an important person is controlled or manipulated by an inferior, the 'tale wags the dog,' and if you are looking in the incorrect place for an idea, you are barking up the wrong tree.'

The more I look at this topic, the worse dogs seem to do. So much for valuing their contribution to our happiness. As a keen reader I wondered whether dogs might get more positive press in literature. Old Argos set the bar pretty high for loyalty by hanging on until Odysseus returned to Ithaca, but then promptly died, so maybe his owner was a bit put out. Launce in Shakespeare's Two Gentlemen of Verona takes time to tell us just how heartless his dog, Crab (great name) was, and says that

I think Crab, my dog, be the sourest-natured
dog that lives: my mother weeping, my father
wailing, my sister crying, our maid howling, our cat
wringing her hands, and all our house in a great
perplexity, yet did not this cruel-hearted cur shed
one tear: he is a stone, a very pebble stone, and
has no more pity in him than a dog

Harsh words for Crab there. Though it sounds like someone had to keep things a bit under control.

Poor Max is owned by the Grinch in Dr Seuss's book, so unlikely to get much respect in that quarter and Pilot, Mr Rochester's dog in Jane Eyre can't have had an easy life, given his owner's mood swings. Enid Blyton's famous five had a dog called Tim, Timmy and sometimes Timothy, so it seems they weren't quite sure what his name was. But another famous child's dog is Dorothy's Toto in the wizard of Oz, a very cute Fox terrier without whom she might never have had her adventures. To quote Keri Weil

Toto is the driving force behind Frank Baum's narrative because it is Dorothy's love for the dog that leads her to run away and escape the dreary moral landscape of Kansas and its arbiter, Miss Gulch. "It was Toto who made Dorothy laugh and saved her from growing as grey as her surroundings," wrote Baum in the original version of the story.

Another Fox Terrier, in Jerome K Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat*, is also a very good travelling companion.

So why man's best friend? Where did that expression come from? Well, in a curious trial from the 1870's George Vest represented his client's case against a man who killed his dog. That speech became more famous than anything Vest did in his entire life as a US senator. And here is an extract:

"Gentlemen of the Jury: The best friend a man has in this world may turn against him and become his enemy. His son or daughter that he has reared with loving care may prove ungrateful. Those who are nearest and dearest to us, those whom we trust with our happiness and our good name, may become traitors to their faith. The money that a man has he may lose. It flies away from him perhaps when he needs it most. A man's reputation may be sacrificed in a moment of ill-considered action. The people who are prone to fall on their knees to do us honor when success is with us, may be the first to throw the stones of malice when failure settles its cloud upon our heads. The one absolutely unselfish friend that a man can have in this selfish world, the one that never deserts him, the one that never proves ungrateful or treacherous, is his dog.

"Gentlemen of the jury, a man's dog stands by him in prosperity and in poverty, in health and in sickness. He will sleep on the cold ground where the wintry winds blow and the snow drives fierce, if only he may be near his master's side. He will kiss the hand that has no food to offer; he will lick the wounds and sores that come from encounter with the roughness of the world. He guards the sleep of his pauper master as if he were a prince. When all other friends desert, he remains. When riches take wing and reputation falls to pieces, he is as constant in his love as the sun in its journey through the heavens.

I hope Vest's speech does a little bit to redress the balance of all those negative phrases I mentioned earlier.

On a personal note I would like to express my appreciation to Fan, Doggo, Monks, Hailey, Frink, Lucy, Gigi, Chandra, Tappit and Betty. Much loved and much missed.

I hope you have enjoyed today's talk and hope you will join me for the final episode of this season (which is season 1) next week.