

Story 2206 (Collected by Ahmet  
Uysal and transcribed from  
tape of Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya.

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The Ağa<sup>1</sup> Who Acquired the Language of Animals

Once there was and once there was not<sup>2</sup> an ağa who owned a large farm. One day this ağa decided to go hunting. As he was searching for game in a forest, he heard a whistling sound. Unable to detect the source of that whistle at first, he then discovered that it was coming from a burning hawthorn bush. The sound was being made by a snake that was trapped in that fiery bush. The ağa thrust the long barrel of his rifle into the bush, and the snake crawled along that barrel to safety.

<sup>1</sup>An ağa (English agha) is a rural landowner, sometimes wealthy, often powerful. The word does not indicate an official title but denotes an economic status. Ağas are often the principal employers of farm workers, and they are often viewed by their employees as harsh, driving and abusive. The term ağa is also used as an honorific for a distinguished male, or perhaps just a person older than the one using the word.

<sup>2</sup>This is the formulaic beginning of a Turkish folk-tale. This opening statement is usually followed by a nonsense jingle filled with word play and forced rhymes. It is called a tekerleme. Nowadays the tekerleme is usually brief, but occasionally one will run to the length of a whole page.

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As soon as it had uncoiled itself from the rifle barrel, the snake said to the ağa, "You may ask me for anything you wish, and I shall provide it for you.

God bless all of us!" exclaimed the ağa, "but I am a wealthy man who has all that he needs and all that he wants

"Surely there must be something that you would cherish if you were only able to acquire it."

"Well, I have always wished that I could understand the language of animals, but that skill is probably unattainable.

it is not Henceforth you will understand animal language.

When he had tired of hunting, the ağa returned home. After they had eaten dinner, his wife said to the ağa, "My dear husband, it has been some time since you have taken me to our farm.

Is that so? I shall take you to the farm tomorrow, and we shall spend a few days there."

On the following day the ağa mounted a stallion, and his wife mounted a mare. Traveling along with them was a colt which the mare had borne a short while earlier. Along the way the colt grew hungry and wanted to eat some

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grass. It walked aside into a meadow and began to graze. While the colt was doing this, all the other travelers had gone along for a short distance, about 200 meters. When the colt realized that its mother was passing out of sight, it began calling for her to wait for it. "How can I wait for you? Can't you see the load I am carrying on my back?"

When the ağa overheard this conversation between the mare and its colt, he felt pity for the younger animal. He said to his wife, "Get off that horse and ride with me on mine."

"My dear husband," she asked, "have I done anything wrong? Why are you ordering me to dismount from the mare?"

The ağa did not answer her question<sup>3</sup> but simply said more loudly, "Get off that horse."

After his wife had dismounted, the ağa removed the mare's bridle and let it rejoin its colt. Traveling then more slowly, the group finally reached the ağa's farm. The farm manager greeted the couple when they arrived, and then he reported on his various activities on the

<sup>3</sup>The narrator apparently knows not that learning the language of animals carries a taboo: If one reveals his knowledge of animal language, he/she will die at once. Biblical Solomon may well have been the most famous speaker of both animal and bird languages. He taught that skill to a few others, but only after his student had promised to observe the taboo scrupulously. See, for example, ATON tales 516, 814, and 1556.

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farm. He explained, for example, how well he had trained two young dogs to protect the flocks. "Well, let us observe how well they work tonight," said the ağa.

About midnight a wolf began howling from the top of a nearby hill. It shouted, "Hey, you, down there. Beware, or I shall come down to eat you.

One of the newly trained sheep dogs responded, "Come down here along the other side of the fence. There are some lambs there. Kill one of them, and we shall eat it together."

An older dog lying nearby overheard this conversation between the wolf and the young dog. Loyal to his master, that older dog was offended by this conversation. He shouted loudly to the wolf, "If you do not stay away from here, I shall, if necessary, break on your back the only tooth I have left in my mouth!"

The ağa had been listening to this conversation, and he understood every word of it. Calling the farm manager to him, he said, "I do not want here those two young sheep dogs that you recently trained. Kill both of them! And from now on, feed only boneless mutton to the very old sheep dog that has served me well for so many years.