

A Study on Cultural Connotations Between Chinese and English Animal Words

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Abstract: As we know, language is a cultural carrier. Culture-loaded vocabulary plays an important role in a language. Different social backgrounds and national cultures have a great effect on the cultural connotations of vocabulary. Along with the development and progress of human society, animal words gradually have got their established connotations in all languages. Many animals have become a kind of symbol in people's thinking and this symbol is reflected in the language. However, the connotations of animal words in one language do not necessarily coincide with those in another because of geographical environment, convention, history and religion in different cultures. This paper attempts to compare the similarities and differences of animal words, the causes for differences so that we can not only better master and use the animal words accurately, but also understand the eastern and western cultures, promoting the cross-cultural communication.

Key words: animal words; cultural discrepancy; cultural connotation

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is the carrier and container of cultural information. Human beings have been interacting with the world and accumulated their experience and knowledge about the world, which are represented in language. As a result, it is inevitable that in human language there exist a plenty of animal words that are often used as kinds of association vehicles. Human beings often associate their feelings and emotions with various animals according to animals' features such as their appearances, habits and characteristics so that the names or images of animals possess specific cultural connotations. Through a comparative study of English and Chinese idioms, one will not only find ideas that are different in both cultures, but one can discover many areas where people in both cultures have had similar experiences and hold similar perspectives. Sometimes these ideas that are held in common are expressed in different ways that reflect the particular genius of each culture.

This paper tries to elaborate the similarities and the differences between the cultural connotations carried by animal words in Chinese and English, find out the causes of differences, with the aim to draw attention to the close relation between cultures and meanings. There is increasing concern over the role culture plays in language learning, which is bound to benefit cross-cultural communication.

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*Received 14 April 2010; accepted 31 July 2010

2. A COMPARISON OF CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS OF ANIMAL WORDS IN CHINESE AND ENGLISH

Cultural connotation of a word refers to the cultural information that a word has been given by the society, including the added meaning or the implied meaning given by the social background, and the special feelings conveyed among a certain social group. In the long history of human beings, animals are always closely related to our existence and development. Thus animal words and expressions have slowly become a significant member of the basic vocabulary of many languages in the world. Chinese and English are no exception. There are a lot of animal words in both English and Chinese but the two countries have great differences in cultural backgrounds and thinking modes. These differences between the two cultures lead to different figurative meanings of animal words. This part tries to elaborate the similarities and the differences between the cultural connotations carried by animal words in Chinese and English.

2.1 Similarities in meaning

Animal is man's best friend. Different animals have different natural instincts and life styles. During the long-term intimate contact with the animals, people have the deep-rooted understandings towards animals. And both the Chinese people and English people nearly have the same knowledge of animal's natural instincts and ways of life. For example, English people would say, "He is as sly as a fox. He's foxy, and you're got to watch him." At the same time, Chinese people would understand the meaning of the sentence as well, in Chinese, "他像狐狸一樣狡猾, 他很狡猾, 你得注意點". This example indicates that "fox" can be used to describe someone who is cunning and deceitful. This example states that different languages and cultures endow "fox" the same cultural associative meaning.

The following animal vehicles have the same associative meanings both in English and in Chinese.

Donkey can be regarded as a kind of animal with dopey and stubborn temper. So the "donkey (驢)" is used to show the character with obstinate and stupid temper both in English and in Chinese, e.g.: "as stubborn as a donkey (像驢一樣固執的)".

Birds can fly to any place they like to. No wonder they are the embodiment of freedom in both English and Chinese. For example: "Bring the child down to me for a fortnight. I have a huge old garden where he can be as free as a bird and perfectly safe".

Parrot is a kind of bird that can imitate people's sound. English people and Chinese people use "parrot(鸚鵡)" to refer to those people repeat someone else's word and ideas without really understanding what you are saying, e.g.: "He doesn't have an idea of his own. He just parrots what other people say. (他沒有自己的主張, 常常鸚鵡學舌。)".

Pig or swine has such characteristics: dirty, greedy, lazy, selfish and ugly, for example, "make a pig of oneself (貪婪地狼吞虎嚥到吃噁)"; "live like a pig in clover(生活奢侈)"; "He has been a pig about money. (他對錢貪得無厭)".

2.2 Differences in meaning

Because of different cultural, historical and traditional background, actually, English people and Chinese people would have different associative meanings towards the same animal vehicle.

2.2.1 Same vehicle with different meanings

"Everybody knows that words represent meaning. The problem is that they may represent several types of meaning simultaneously" (Wang Zhen-ya, 2000:34). "According to Geoffrey Leech (1981:9-23), 'meaning' in the wider sense may embrace 1. Conceptual meaning (or sense); 2. Connotative meaning; 3.

Social meaning; 4. Affective meaning; 5. Reflected meaning; 6. Collocative meaning; and 7. Thematic meaning” (Yang Zijian & Liu Xueyun 1996:801). Among them, “connotative meaning, social meaning, affective meaning, reflected meaning, and collocative meaning can be brought together under the heading associative meaning” (Wang Zhen-ya, 2000:38).

2.2.1.1 Same vehicle with different connotative meanings

“Connotative meaning is the communicative value an expression has in addition to the purely conceptual meaning” (Wang Zhen-ya, 2000:35). “Connotations of words vary from culture to culture. If they are ignored, serious misunderstandings can occur in cross-cultural communication. The connotations of a great many English words are different from those of their translation equivalents in Chinese” (Wang Zhen-ya, 2000:63). Some of these English animal words will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Dog is a distinctive example in the two cultures. “狗” is very pejorative in meaning in Chinese. This can be readily illustrated by the Chinese words and idiomatic expressions in which it is an element: “走狗”, “喪家狗”, “狗頭軍師”, “狗急跳牆”, “狗腿子”. Many others can be added to this list, but they are enough to exemplify the negative attitudes of the Chinese people towards these creatures. In English culture, however, a dog is a pet, which can even be considered a family member. For example, there are three faithful friends: an old wife, an old dog and ready money. (人有三個忠實的朋友：老妻、老狗和現金。). It is hard for English speakers to understand why “走狗” is a pejorative term in Chinese. To them a dog is lovely and a “running dog” is doubly lovely. “Dog” and “狗” convey the same conceptual meaning, but their connotations are quite different in English and Chinese cultures.

In English culture, owl is symbolized of wisdom. “As wise as an owl” indicates that the native English people associate wisdom with this bird. In children’s books and cartoons, the owl implies calmness and solemnity. For example, “He peers owlishly at us through his glasses(他透過他的眼鏡嚴肅而機智地打量著我們); “A tenant offering five bales of cotton was told, after some owl-eyed figuring, that this cotton exactly balanced his debt. (一個佃農交了 5 包棉花，老闆精明地一盤算，告訴他說這些棉花剛好抵上他所欠的債務。).” However, there is a superstitious belief that owl is an unlucky bird and is the symbol of the disaster and death among the Chinese people’s minds, as the Chinese saying goes, “貓頭鷹進宅，好事不來 (an owl visiting a home pretends misfortune in that house) ”.

2.2.1.2 Same vehicle with different affective meanings

“Affective meaning is communicated when the feeling or attitudes are expressed in language. In other cases, affective meaning is conveyed through the mediation of conceptual, connotative, or stylistic meaning” (Wang Zhen-ya, 2000:36).

Let’s take the dragon for example. In Chinese, especially in ancient time, people thought dragon is a mythical animal with great power. To Chinese, a dragon is something sacred and has been referred to the ancestor of the Chinese nation—that’s why the Chinese all call themselves descendents of the dragon and Chinese feudal emperors were often referred to sons of dragons, wearing clothes with designs of dragons. Chinese idioms that involve the word “龍” with good connotations are as follows: “龍騰虎躍”, “龍生龍，鳳生鳳”, “龍鳳呈祥”, “生龍活虎”. Many Chinese would say “望子成龍”, but its literal correspondence of form: “To expect one’s son to become a dragon” would sound puzzled and ridiculous to the native English people. In western people’s minds, the dragon is a large imaginary animal that has wings and a long tail and can breathe out fire. To the westerners, the dragon is often a symbol of evil, a fierce monster that destroys and therefore must be destroyed. It originates from the Bible story, in which the Satan, who fought against the God, was called the great dragon. Dragon in the western world is a cruel and vicious creature. Several stories of saints or heroes deal with struggles against the monsters, which in most cases are slain in the end. There is an example from the Collins Concise English Language Dictionary, “If you call a woman a dragon, you mean that she is fierce and unpleasant. (如果把一個女人叫做 dragon，是說她很凶，很令人討厭。)”

In Chinese people's eye, "bat" means "auspicious" for the letters "蝠" and "福" are pun in sounds. To English people, they are very frightened because the bat is annoying and ugly and connected with evil and darkness. Therefore, in English, expressions with "bat" have derogatory meanings, e.g.: "as blind as a bat (像蝙蝠一樣瞎)"; "crazy as a bat (像蝙蝠一樣瘋)".

The Chinese people give preference to the petrel. Petrel is a bird that flies over the vast ocean with courage to brave the storms. So petrel is associated in China with braving hardships and ordeal and courage. The petrel emerges in many juvenile diaries, youthful fictional writings, and appears as the trademark for a number of products. However, the English people do not like petrel, because they think petrel is the symbol for disasters, for when a storm is arising, petrel will flush, flying like lightening between black clouds and the sea. So the petrel is considered as an omen of disaster in English. For example, "storm petrel" means a person regarded as a herald of trouble, strife or violence or someone who delights in such trouble, etc.

2.2.2 Different vehicles with same reflected meaning

"Reflected meaning arises in words of multiple conceptual meaning, when one sense of a word forms part of our response to another sense" (Wang Zhen-ya, 2000:36).

"It reveals the fact that English and Chinese speakers may view the same thing in different ways" (Wang Zhen-ya, 2000:75). This will be illustrated by the following examples.

To Chinese people, tiger is a big and powerful carnivorous animal that is called the king of the beasts, so tiger is the symbol of the bravery, courage, vigor, decisiveness and power, e.g.: "虎虎有生氣, 虎頭虎腦, 虎將" etc. In contrast, English people consider that the king of the beasts is lion, and lion is the symbol of the courage, ferocity, dignity of dominance, as can be seen from such expressions: "regal as a lion(獅子般莊嚴)"; "majestic as a lion(像獅子一樣雄偉)". The lion in English culture enjoys high prestige. Richard I, king of England in the latter part of the 12th century, was known as lion-hearted for his courage and chivalry. There is an expression "to be brave as a lion". When someone is called a lion, he is referred to a celebrity or a famous person. Therefore, there is another idiom like "a lion-hunter", which means "hosts or hostesses who seek out celebrities with whom to impress their guests." It's no wonder, then, that the English have chosen the lion as their symbol as in the expression "the British lion". The word has been used to form many English idioms with such connotations. For instance, "lion's share" means the largest part; "the lion's den" means a place of great danger; "to meet a lion in one's path" means to encounter a daunting obstacle etc.

To mean "boast", in Chinese, people would say "吹牛". But in English, people would like to use "talk horse". In western countries, horses are beasts of burden, while oxen are raised for milk and beef. Horses have more opportunities to demonstrate their strength than oxen that are strong domestic animals, too. So even though "strong as an ox" can be heard in English, "strong as a horse" is used more frequently. In China, however, oxen are the major beasts of burden in rural areas. No wonder there are such idiomatic expressions as "力大如牛", "壯得如牛" in Chinese. But no Chinese would say "力大如馬", "壯得像頭馬".

To refer to "urgent", Chinese people would say "熱鍋上的螞蟻". But the English people would prefer to say, "like a cat on hot bricks(熱鍋上的貓)".

To mean someone is wet through, Chinese people would say "像只落湯雞". In English, people would say "like a drowned rat".

Chinese people usually like to use "雞" as a vehicle, such as "雞皮疙瘩", and English people would say "goose pimple". Chinese people say "殺雞取卵", but English people give such idiom, "to kill the goose that lays the golden egg".

2.2.3 Meaning gap

2.2.3.1 Gap in Chinese

In English culture, some animal vehicles have rich and varied cultural connotations. It is known that bull is just an ordinary animal in China and doesn't have special cultural associative meanings. The Chinese people may guess the literal meaning of the idiom, "a bull in a china shop(瓷器店裏的公牛)". But they would not have the image that would be evoked in the minds of English-speaking people: an angry, snorting bull charging into a shop filled with exquisite fragile porcelain. Consequently, Chinese would be less appreciative of the vividness of the expression "a bull in a china shop", which means a person who is clumsy and bungling and causes a lot of trouble in a situation requiring tact and delicacy.

Beaver is a hard-working animal in North America, but the Chinese people know little of it. A beaver has a unique technique and ability for creativity. Its constant activity, its habit of gnawing down trees and building complex "homes" and its skill and ingenuity in doing this have earned for the animal the name eager beaver. So the idiom "eager beaver" in English means someone who is too industrious and works harder than they should. The term sometimes has a slightly derogatory connotation. However, to most Chinese people, a beaver is only a kind of animal without any cultural connotations.

Cat has rich cultural connotations in English culture. In the English mythology, cat can even affect the change of the weather, as the saying goes, "to rain cats and dogs(傾盆大雨)" and "the cat has a gale of wind in her tail.(這貓尾巴裏有一陣大風)"; "there is nothing for it but to wait and see how the cat jumps(眼前只有靜待，看看事情如何轉變，英語中“貓怎樣跳”指風向怎樣變。)"

In western countries, cat is a household pet. Under the particular cultural background, the "cat" can be used to refer to many kinds of character, for example,

- (1) Don't listen to her gossip, she is a cat. 別聽她搬弄是非，她是個心地惡毒的女人。
- (2) He was down with fever and was sick as a cat. 他發燒病倒，病情嚴重。
- (3) I cannot stand that man; He's as sleek as a cat. 我對那個人簡直無法忍受，他花言巧語，油頭滑舌。

It is difficult for Chinese people to understand the above examples. However, the Chinese people use "cat" as metaphors to refer to persons in different senses such as "饑貓"; "夜貓子".

2.2.3.2 Gap in English

All the Chinese people know the "crane" in Chinese stands for longevity. So Chinese parents name their child as "鶴年" or "鶴齡" to show their hope that the child will live to a ripe old age. The crane is often paired with the pine tree, which is a symbol for sturdiness and long life. But to western minds, crane is thought to be an ugly bird, which does not arise any such association.

"Tortoise" in Chinese people's minds has two meanings, one symbolizes longevity; the other means "foolish people". However, "tortoise" doesn't have such kind associative connotations in English culture; the tortoise is just a slow-moving and not very attractive creature.

"鴛鴦" in Chinese usually refers to the couple, but in English, the mandarin duck doesn't have such cultural connotations.

3. THE CAUSES OF THE DISCREPANCY BETWEEN CULTURAL CONNOTATION OF ENGLISH AND CHINESE ANIMAL WORDS

The culture of a nation is formed by many factors. And the development of a society influences the formation, the development and the disappearance of the culture. Cultural connotations of some animal words in English and Chinese are closely related to the religion, history, geographical environment, and the customs of a nation. According to these factors, I will take some typical animals for example to elaborate the causes of their discrepancies in Chinese and English.

3.1 Influence of geographical environment

China is an agriculture-cultivating country. From the invention of the farming, the agricultural culture is on the dominant role in China. Ox is the main farming tool in the agricultural history in China. The “ox” is the symbol of power and hardworking in Chinese culture. For example, “健壯如牛”, “牛勁”, “老黃牛”, “孺子牛”etc. But in Britain, the English people always attach importance to the livestock husbandry, so the horse plays an important role in the western culture. Here are the English idioms associated with the horse, for example,

- (1) work like a horse 辛苦地工作
- (2) eat like a horse 狼吞虎嚥
- (3) lock the stable door after the horse is stolen 亡羊補牢

What is more? Britain is a sea-rounded country, and there is a vast seacoast so its resources in fishery are very rich. Because of this, there are so many idioms about fishery such “a big fish(大人物)”; “a poor fish(倒楣的傢伙)”; “have other fish to fry(有另一件更重要的事要做)”; “make fish of one and flesh of another(偏愛一方; 厚此薄彼)”; “never after to teach fish to swim(不要班門弄斧)”; “a whale(聰明的人)”.

3.2 Influence of convention

Due to different living conventions, different nations have obvious cultural differences in concept of value and aesthetic standards. For instance, in Chinese, the animal word “magpie” is considered as good luck because “magpie” in Chinese, is pronounced “喜鵲(Xi Que)”. “喜(Xi)” in Chinese means good and happy. In Chinese tradition, there exist such idioms as “喜鵲叫, 好事到(when magpies are calling, it must have good news)”. However, in some places in Scotland, if a magpie flies near a window, it is a symbol of bad luck. In a state of England, if someone happens to meet a magpie he has to spit three times to avoid bad luck.

People in the west have a long tradition of keeping pets. Of them, domestic animals such as dogs and cats are dear and valued companions. However, in China “dog” is disgusting in people’s eyes. Naturally they are different idiomatic expressions toward “dog” in the use of language, for instance, in Chinese, people have such derogative expressions as “狗腿子”, “狗崽子”. Nonetheless, English people have favorable expressions as follows: “a top dog(最重要的人物)”; “a lucky dog(幸運兒)”.

3.3 Influence of history

Different countries possess different history culture, which mainly comprises allusion, myths, poems, ancient books and records, etc. Among them, allusion is the most important, it reflects the national characteristic. The cultural connotation from history is the gems of human cultural heritage. It is worth

learning history culture. Knowledge of the historical background of English and Chinese may help comprehend what the cultural connotation means.

As we know, England is governed by the Pope and the king for a long time, so in English, there are so many idioms to express their outrage, disdain and averseness such as “the king and pope, the lion and wolf(國王教皇, 獅子豺狼)” ; “kings and bears often worry their keepers(伴君如伴虎)” ; “locust years” comes from Exodus, ch.10 in the Bible, which means “不景氣的年代, 災難深重的歲月” ; “Balaam’s ass(巴蘭的驢子)” means “平時沉默馴服, 突然開口抗議的人” from Number, ch.22; “worship the golden calf” means “拜金牛犢, 崇拜金錢” ; “one’s ewe lamb(最珍愛之物)” from Matthew, ch.23; And “sheep and goat(好人與壞人)” from Matthew ch.25 in the Bible. “the dove of peace(和平鴿)” is from the Old Testament. “the ugly duckling(醜小鴨)” is from Hans Andersen’s tales. “亡羊補牢(It is not too late to mend the fold even after some of the sheep have been lost.)” and “狐假虎威(As ass in lion’s skin)” are from Intrigues of the Warring States (戰國策); “老馬識途” is from Fan Fei Zi(韓非子); “兔死狗烹” is from Records of the Historian (史記). The Chinese history is longer than the English, so the Chinese language is rich in such idioms with animal words.

3.4 Influence of religion

Religion, the main component of human culture, reflects different attitudes towards admiration and taboo of each nation. Chinese culture is deeply affected by Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism, among which the effect of Buddhism is the most inveterate, while English culture is greatly influenced by Christianity. There is no question that Chinese expressions reflect the influence of Buddhism, whereas English expressions are closely related to Christianity. So “一人得道, 雞犬升天” is often translated as “even the dogs swagger when their master wins favor”.

In contrast, idioms from Bible and Christianity are abundant, such as “the gold calf(金牛犢—the adoration for money)” ; “beard the lion(揪獅子的鬚鬚)” ; “a lion in the path(攔路虎)” ; “Cast pearls before swine” stems from Matthew in the New Testament; “a little bird told me” is from Ecclesiastes in the Bible; “separate the sheep from the goats” is from Exodus in the Bible.

We have some other idioms that are associated with animals from the Bible:

- (1) cast pearl before swine 明珠暗投 (把珍珠拋給豬)
- (2) separate the sheep from the goats 把好人與壞人分開

3.5 Influence of fables and mythologies

Idioms are usually closely related to distinctive cultural fables and mythologies. The English idioms belong to this kind mainly come from the Aesop’s Fables, as the following animal idioms: “a dog in the manger(占馬槽之狗/占著茅坑不拉屎)” means someone who does not want others to use or enjoy something even though they themselves do not need or want it; “to cry wolf (在不需要援助時求援)” means to keep asking for help that you do not really need, with the result that when you do need people do not believe you.

Most of such Chinese idioms are from Chinese historical literature and ancient fables and fairy tales. They are vivid with profound meanings. For example,

- (1) “守株待兔” means “to stand by a tree stump waiting for a hare—wait for gains without pains”
- (2) “畫蛇添足” means “to draw a snake and add feet to it—to ruin the effect by adding something”
- (3) “井底之蛙” means “a frog in a well—a person with a very limited outlook and experience”

(4) “精衛填海” means “the mythical bird Jingwei trying to fill up the sea with pebbles—dogged determination to achieve one’s purpose”

For example, we have the English idiom “cook one’s goose”. The literal Chinese translation of this idiom is “烹某人的鵝”. That’s confusing to the Chinese. Its correct translation should be “挫敗某人的計畫” or “戰勝某人”.

This idiom comes from an ancient story. English tradition has it that in the Middle Ages, a city was suddenly surrounded by enemies. A resident of the city hanged a goose on a tower to express his scorn for the enemies. But that was a terribly wrong action. The enemies could not stand this shame. Every soldier became mad, and soon they conquered the city. The goose was cooked by the enemy soldiers. Later, people use the idiom to mean “frustrate somebody’s will” or “destroy or defeat somebody”.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper analyses the cultural connotations between the English and Chinese animal words, and compares the animal images and their cultural connotations. We have learned that animal words have their own features and cultural connotations in their own languages. As an important element in forming idiom, animal word plays a distinctive role and has rich expressiveness. Because of different geographical circumstances, historical backgrounds, regions and conventions between Chinese and English, the implied meanings of the same animal are possibly different. We must be well acquainted with the habits and environments of both Chinese and English when using animal words, and try our best to know the cultural connotations carried by animal words. In the process of cross-cultural communication, we should pay special attention to the cultural connotations of animal words of the two languages, keep objectivity of the original and shun subjectivity. Only in this way, can we not only better master and use the animal words accurately, but also understand the eastern and western cultures, promoting the cross-cultural communication.

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