

A Comparative Analysis of Cultural Connotations of English-Chinese Animal Words

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Abstract

As a social phenomena, language carries a lot of social-cultural factors. It is impossible for languages to exist and develop in social vacuum. Proverbs, as a form reflecting language, are greatly connected with culture. They deliver all sorts of information and cultural knowledge. In addition, vocabulary is the most sensitive, active and basic component of language. Therefore, the influence of culture on language is also embedded in vocabulary. Animal words or cultural-loaded animal words are a category of words rich in cultural connotations. Human beings living in the same world have different cultural backgrounds, which leads to different cultural connotations of animal words. This paper will make a comparative analysis of the cultural connotations behind animal words between English and Chinese proverbs. Thus similarities and differences are explored. And then it makes a further study on the reasons behind differences of cultural connotations. Meanwhile some feasible suggestions on cross-cultural communication will be put forward.

Keywords: comparative analysis; Cultural connotations; Cross-cultural communication.



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1. Introduction

For nearly 30 years, with the deepening of our country's opening up to the outside world, foreign language teaching has boomed. Meanwhile, the excitement of learning Mandarin around the world has been unfolding. People are eager to try to communicate with foreigners. Cross-cultural communication occurs every moment in the world especially between English and Chinese speakers.

In a cross-cultural study, there is inevitably a cultural contrast (HuWenzhong, 2002). Language is said to be the carrier of its culture (Fishwick, 1999). In English and Chinese, words not only have their literal meanings, but also have their implicit associative meanings, metaphorical meanings and symbolic meanings. Meanings of words could be very different in changing emotional coloring. These are called their cultural connotations (Sapir, 2002).

Animals have played an important role in the lives of human beings' ancestors for a long period of time. First, as enemies, human beings might hate them. Then, as food, human beings would like to eat them. Gradually, as friends, human beings would like to play with them. People have different feelings toward different animals. Therefore, different animals may be described differently. And this paper is intended to reveal the different cultural connotations of animal words and explore their impacts on cross-cultural communication.

2. Comparison of Cultural Connotations between English and Chinese

It is because of the great differences in cultures that the meanings of animal words in English differ from that in Chinese. "It can be seen from many English books, that the English speaking-people have different associations of most animals from Chinese. This is a reflection of cultures." (TianYinglin, 2007) These differences can be divided into four categories, which will state as follows.

2.1. The Same Animal Words Sharing the Same Cultural Connotations

Generally speaking, human beings live in the same world in need of some same living conditions. Sometimes people have same associations of animals. Hence, in Chinese and in English, sometimes the same animal words share the same cultural connotations. The following animal words have the same cultural connotations both in English and in Chinese.

1. Dog:

In both English and Chinese, it is typical for people to derogate from dogs' reputations. There are many idioms concerning dogs in Chinese, such as "狗仗人势"; "狗眼看人"; "狼心狗肺". In English culture: "a dog's dinner/breakfast"; "a dog's life"; "dog eat dog"; "going to the dogs". In addition, when "dog" is used to refer to a person, it means "a man or woman who is humble or ugly".

Both Chinese people and English people do not speak highly of dogs. Ancient Chinese people believed that dogs are first of all watchdogs. At that time, dogs were kept because they are useful. Because of the influence

of the external culture, the word “dog” may have derogatory sense in English. Ancient English people considered dogs as evils. Therefore, they did not always think highly of dogs.

2. Rat:

In Britain and in China, people despise rats because of rats’ nature of stealing. In Chinese, there is a proverb “老鼠过街，人人喊打” which embodies people’s hatred for rats. Therefore, the words of “rat” appear mostly with derogatory meanings. For example, “鼠目寸光”; “胆小如鼠”; “鼠雀之辈”; “抱头鼠窜” in Chinese; “smell a rat”; “rat on somebody”; “rat on something”; “rat race” in English. Rat is usually a symbol of bad things. Generally speaking, rats have a bad reputation in both English and Chinese cultures.

Other animals that have similar associations in both cultures: Wolf means ferocity and voracity in both English and Chinese. Goose means stupidity and shows a character of slowness in the eye of British and Chinese. Sheep is regarded as a kind of animal of sweet and tame temper in these two cultures.

To be honest, these similarities may help people have better understandings of some expressions in cross-cultural communication.

2.2. The Same Animal Words Sharing Different Cultural Connotations

“Having been living in different cultural backgrounds for a long time, the English and Chinese nations will associate the animal words in their respective way of thinking and according to their own ethical standards.” (Zhangnan, 2016) Thus, different connotations occur in different cultures.

2.2.1. Words with Positive sense in English, but with Derogatory sense in Chinese

1. Duck:

English speakers especially people in Britain used to address a woman ducks in a friendly way. They think ducks are clever. Mostly, duck in English has connotations of lovely persons or lovely things. They often use ducks to describe females. But in Chinese, there is “鸭步鹅行” to demonstrate a man walking in a very slow pace. Usually ducks are not popular in China due to their tardy attitude towards almost everything. In some cases, the word “duck” may have derogatory meaning in English, for example, “a lame-duck president” means a politician whose period of office will soon end and who will not be elected again.

2. Owl:

In Chinese culture, owl is a kind of animal that rests in days, goes out at night and has bad voice. As a result, Chinese people believe that it is associated with disasters and death. In ancient times, there are some Chinese proverbs like “夜猫子进宅，无事不来”; “不怕夜猫子叫，就怕夜猫子笑”. However, in western countries, owl is a symbol of wisdom. In children’s books and comic books, the image of owls is calm, serious and intelligent. And when there is a dispute between animal, the owl is to be ruled; when there is a crucial point, the owl is to be consulted with. Sometimes, in English culture, owl was related to person who is active at night, which has the same meaning as “夜猫子” in Chinese.

2.2.2. Words with Positive Sense in Chinese, but with Derogatory sense in English

1. Bat:

In Chinese, bat is called“蝙蝠”. Because the pronunciation of the Chinese character “蝠” is the same as the pronunciation of the Chinese character “福”, bat is the symbol of happiness and luckiness. On the contrary, English people are frightened when they are talking about bats. They consider bats as evils. Thus bat in English has derogatory meanings. There exist some expressions, such as “as blind as a bat”; “crazy as a bat”; “he is a bit batty”. All of these expressions reflect the fact that English people do not speak highly of bats.

2. Dragon:

In Chinese culture, the name of dragon first came from the name of stars “苍龙七宿(Canglong seven places in the heaven)”, ancient Chinese people observed that whenever these stars shown up, there was a rain. As for agricultural civilization, raining is good for harvest. That’s the reason why Chinese people love dragons so much. And later on, they would like to call themselves the offspring of the dragon. Therefore, Chinese people regard the dragon as the symbol of Chinese nation. They call themselves descendants of the dragon. In addition, there are a lot of expressions related with animal words, such as “龙马精神”; “龙凤呈祥”; All of these expressions convey positive senses. But this is not the case in English, the explanation of the “dragon” is that (1) a large aggressive animal with wings and a long tail; (2) a woman who behaves in an aggressive frightening way. In western people’s minds, the dragon is a kind of evil monster. For example, English people may say “she is a dragon .

In brief, people living in various backgrounds have different views on the world and nature.

2.3. Different Animal Words Sharing Similar Cultural Connotations

As human beings live in the same world, people could have the same feelings to express. As is known, English speakers and Chinese do not always think of animal in the same way. Thus, sometimes, people have different animal words sharing similar cultural connotations in English and Chinese.

1. Bull and horse:

In the minds of the Chinese, cattle, no matter cows, bulls, or buffalo, show characteristics of strength and selflessness. As a result, the bull has been universally praised. There are innumerable words to commend bull in Chinese, such as “力大如牛”; “气壮如牛”; “健壮如牛”. And people are more in favor of Luxun’s “俯首甘为孺子牛 (like a willing ox with head bowed)”. Nevertheless, there are words of bull with derogatory senses, like “牛鬼蛇神”, but there are few derogatory senses of bull. In English, they prefer to use “horse” to express the same meanings. For example, “as strong as a horse”; “work like a horse.” Above all, let’s guess that in ancient times, Chinese farmers use bulls to cultivate fields while in Britain, horses have been used for farming work.

2. Tiger and lion:

In Chinese culture, tigers are usually considered as a king of beasts. Due to its strong, powerful and fierce characteristics, many words are linked with tigers. For example, “虎将”; “虎威”; “生龙活虎”; “如虎添翼” and so on. However, in western countries, lions are regarded as the king of the beasts with the brave, ferocious and majestic image. The British use the lion as a symbol of their own country. And “the British Lion” refers to the Great Britain. King Charles is regarded as “the lion heart” because of his most brave behavior. Therefore, lions are used to refer to celebrities. For example, a literary lion. English contains a lot of idioms related to lions: “as bold as a lion”; “as majestic as a lion” and “beard the lion in his den.” All of these expressions are more commonly used.

3. Other Animals:

Sometimes the same connotations of animal words may be expressed differently in English and Chinese. This phenomenon is particularly evident in idioms. When it comes to “timidity”, people will immediately think of the Chinese idioms “胆小如鼠” because people in China use “鼠” to describe timidity. On the contrary, English speakers use rabbit, chicken, pigeon to make analogies. And there are such expressions as “as timid as a rabbit”; “chicken-hearted” or “pigeon-hearted”. “害群之马” in Chinese corresponds to the English “the black sheep of the family”. To mean “anxiety”, Chinese people would say “热锅上的蚂蚁”. But English speakers would like to say “like a cat on hot bricks”. To mean “boast”, in Chinese, it is “吹牛”. In English, it would be “talk horse”. In addition, “瓮中捉鳖” corresponds to “a rat in a hole” in English; “落汤鸡” becomes “a drowned rat” in English; “一丘之貉” becomes “birds of a feather”; “引狼入室” corresponds to “set the fox to keep the geese”.

2.4. Blankness of Animal Words in English and in Chinese

According to He Shanfen, the proportion of English animal words is much higher than that of Chinese animal words (HeShanfen, 2002). The reason is that Britain was a maritime hegemon. And people had the opportunity to keep contact with more animal species. Secondly, English language was influenced by other western languages, so there are many foreign animal words. However, Chinese animal words are mainly related to people’s daily life. Thus, there exists blankness of animal words in English and in Chinese.

Some animal words stir associations in one language, but fail to bring about the same or close connotations on another language. So one animal word may be the apple of people in one language, but may become dross for people in another language. These animal words are called unique animal words here.

2.4.1. Unique Cultural Connotations in English

Here unique animal words in English refer to words that have some specific cultural connotations in English. But these cultural connotations do not exist in Chinese.

1. Cat:

By the tenth century, the church had superstitious ideas of cats. Believers generally thought that the sorcerer could be turned into a cat. Cats with dark eyes and walking no sound are like ghosts that don’t comply with God’s instructions. So they think the cat is the embodiment of the devil (LeeZhizhen, 2012). From then on, words with cat have a derogatory connotation in English. Cat means “viciousness, evils, scourges”. For example, “She is a cat.”; “old cat”; “A bag of cats”. The word “cat” has derogatory meanings many of which have spread so far. Some English speakers believe that if the black cat crosses the path people are going forward, something bad will happen. In Chinese, the character “猫” does not have such meanings.

2. Kangaroo:

A kangaroo is a large Australian animal which moves by jumping on its back legs. Female kangaroos carry their babies in a pouch on their stomach. As is known, Australia was one of the British Commonwealth, so English speakers are familiar with kangaroos. But after a long time, Chinese people know that there is a kind of animal called kangaroo. Kangaroo refers to Australian in English. In some cases, it means a kind of British legislature that the president or the chairman of the committee has the right to choose an amendment to debate. The debate can jump from one clause to another as a kangaroo. But In Chinese cultures, such connotations do not exist.

3. Swan:

Swan refers to pure and beautiful persons. According to Greek legend, the god of music, Apollo was lavished some gifts by Zeus. He got a golden miter, a chariot drawn by swans, and a golden lyre. And this beautiful young man was accompanied by an equally beautiful male swan. Later, swan came to represent the power of poetry and the divinely inspired poet himself.

2.4.2. Unique Cultural Connotations in Chinese

Here unique animal words in Chinese refer to words that have some specific cultural connotations in Chinese. On the contrary, these cultural connotations do not exist in English.

1. Ant:

Ant is formerly known as the middle man in a real estate transaction. The middle in housing trade is called an ant. People use ant to describe someone or something small, humble, trifling. For example, “蚁鼻” (little money); “蚁窍” (small holes); “蚁斗蜗争” (small fights).

2. Crane:

In Chinese, crane is usually regarded as a kind of immortal birds, a symbol of health and longevity. Thus, there are “鹤寿”; “松鹤延年” in Chinese. Moreover, when people celebrate the birthday of the old, they often send a picture of a holy crane to express a wish of longevity. But as for English speakers, the crane does not cause the same association. So Westerners who first come to China would be confused that a picture of a crane could be a popular birthday gift for the old.

3. Tortoise:

“Tortoise” is frequently used in China. On the one hand, the tortoise symbolizes the longevity. Therefore, stone tortoises are built in front of palaces, temples and other buildings. On the other hand, the tortoise refers to a wife whose husband has an affair. This shows a strong derogatory meaning. These two kinds of mixed meanings don't appear in Western cultures.

From the comparison of these animal expressions between Chinese and English, It can be seen that different connotations of animal words occur in different languages. It is culture differences that make these different expressions.

3. Reasons Causing the Differences of Cultural Connotations

English and Chinese animal expressions convey different cultural features and they have different cultural connotations. The cultural connotations of language have an inseparable relationship with the geographical environment, historical background, customs, religious beliefs, and values of a nation (Brown and Gillian, 2000). Here are some analyses which may help understand the different cultural connotations of animal words.

3.1. Influence of Geographical Conditions

Britain is an island country, and most British people have to make a living on the sea. People have more chances know animals in the sea and have abundant associations with them. Such as fish: “a big fish; a fish out of water; an odd fish; have bigger fish to fry; neither fish nor fowl”. Shark: “loan shark; a card shark”.

While Chinese people live on the mainland and they make a living by agriculture (Harris and Moran, 1987). As a result, Chinese people are self-sufficient, and they don't want to leave their hometown. In other words, they don't want to lose their lands. Hence there are a lot of farming idioms and idioms with animal images in Chinese. For example, “to try to make an ox drink by forcing his head into the water—to try to impose one's will on somebody”; “an old ox in rural area—a man who has suffered a lot”. “牛” plays an important role in people's daily life with such phrases as “老黄牛, 猛牛, 壮牛” containing positive associations.

3.2. Influence of Conventional Customs

Many words and phrases both in Chinese and English come from colloquial words and customs of different nations. Due to different living customs, different nations have obvious cultural differences. As a result, Chinese people form different cultural values in their daily life. For instance, in Chinese, the animal word “magpie” is considered as a symbol of good luck because no matter what happens “magpie” calls in the same tone. As for people who belief Confucianism hold the idea that sages should be consistent and perseverant just like magpies. In addition, the voice of magpies is sweet. Therefore, they think magpie as a symbol of luckiness. In Chinese, there exist such idioms as “喜鹊叫, 好事到 (When magpies are calling, it must have good news)”. However, in some places of Scotland, if a magpie flies near a window, it is a symbol of bad luck. In England, if someone happens to meet a magpie, he has to spit three times to avoid bad luck. Magpies have derogatory meanings in English cultures. Meanwhile, English people often use magpies to describe someone who is noisy.

3.3. Influence of Religions on Animal Words

Religion is a main component of culture which has a deep impact on people's lives (Kramersch, 2000). The differences on religious belief reflect people's different attitudes toward the world (McCarthy and Carter, 1994). Therefore, a lot of animal expressions are created with the influences of religions. It is known that most English speakers believe in Christianity, while the Chinese people are deeply influenced by Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism.

English people have believed in Christianity for a long time. The Bible is the holy book of Christianity which deeply influences the cultural values in the society. In daily life, people also like to quote a lot from the Bible to instruct their lives and behaviors. In Bible, dogs are despised by people. For example there exists such an expression as "Be aware of dogs". In addition, English people often regard cat as the image of Satan, a Devil. Therefore, there is such an expression "Don't let a *black cat* cross your path. 不要让霉运降临到你头上。"

Now that Chinese culture is influenced by the three philosophies: Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism, there are many animal expressions involving the ideologies of these three philosophies. There are some examples:

b) 狗咬吕洞宾，不识好人心。

望子成龙，望女成凤。

大鱼吃小鱼，小鱼吃虾米。

"吕洞宾" is a famous person in Taoism, who is famous for his kindness. "龙" and "凤" are imaginary animals in Buddhism and symbolize power, high social status. The third one with "鱼" is influenced by the principle recorded in Confucianism talking about the strict social classes and rules.

3.4. Influence of Historical Backgrounds

The different historical backgrounds of the English and Chinese people with their different legends and anecdotes have provided rich and varied materials for their idioms, proverbs, or other expressions with animal words. Generally speaking, England has been governed by the Pope and the King for a long time. In the early days, the United Kingdom was still influenced by religions and superstitious ideas. Animal words like "the lion heart"; "She is a cat." and "beaver away at something" "king and pope, the lion and wolf" are good examples. Although then the British began to pursue science and technology, these expressions are still an important part in people's daily life. China has two thousand years of feudal history. In ancient China, the King is regarded as a dragon, and the Queen is considered as a phoenix, so there are "龙飞凤舞" and "龙凤呈祥" in Chinese.

4. Conclusion

Through the comparative analyses of the cultural connotations of animal words between English and Chinese, It can be clearly seen that the animal words in any language are not only symbolic symbols of animal images. Cultural differences impose a deep cultural mark on animals. And animal words have rich cultural connotations. In order to truly master the animal words, language learners need to work hard to understand the connotations of animal words. Similarly, in order to correctly understand the cultural connotations of animal words, people should have better understandings of traditional cultures. So that people can make smooth cross-cultural communication.

5. Implications on Cross-Cultural Communication

Through the above comparative analyses, it can be found that animal words, as a small part of the large vocabulary system, deeply embody cultural connotations, which make it difficult for cross-cultural communications. For example "The Jones family live like fighting cocks ever since he got that new well paid job at the ministry." There is no rare word in this sentence, and the grammar structure is simple. However, many people could not understand it. Why? The reason is that they can't understand the phrase "fighting cock". In Chinese people's minds, "fighting cock" is usually used to refer to a kind of game during which people are "fooling around, spending their lives in a restless way". In fact, British people use fighting cocks to mean eating well and living comfortably. The sentence tries to convey the idea that Jones has had a good time since he found a new job in his office.

If people do not understand the unique cultural connotations, they will try to figure out some information through other expressions from their own cultures (Hall, 1977). Sometimes, they will have misunderstandings and probably be confused. That's how the deviation of cultural connotations caused. And eventually people will get failure communication.

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