

Original Paper

A Study on Cultural Connotations of Animal Words in Chinese and English

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Abstract

Language and culture are inseparable from each other and words are the direct representation of culture. In both English and Chinese, there are a great many animal words which carry unique cultural connotations in each culture. Through the comparison on the cultural connotations of animal words in both languages, it is found that the same word may have divergent connotations and different words also can carry similar implications. The findings imply that it is necessary to better understand these cultural connotations in order to conduct a successful cross-cultural communication.

Keywords

cultural connotation, animal words, comparison, English and Chinese

1. Introduction

Language and culture are complexly intertwined with each other. They evolve together, influence each other, and ultimately define what it means to be human beings. A particular language is usually shared by a specific group of people, who have their specific worldviews, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors and conventions. Kroeber (1923) once stated “culture then, began when speech was present, and from then on, the enrichment of either means the further development of the other.” In this sense, it can be said that language is culture and culture is language. When a Chinese-speaker interacts with an English-speaker, it means that they also communicate with respective culture. They can’t successfully communicate with each other if they do not have knowledge of their respective culture even though they can access their language. So learning a new language not only means learning its alphabet, the word arrangement and the rules of grammar, but also learning about the specific language community’s beliefs, customs and behaviors.

As one of the most basic aspects of a language, words are the direct representation of culture. In the long historical evolvement and development of human beings, particularly, in ancient times, animals

are important providers of human's food and clothes. Therefore, human beings have a close relationship with animals and they coexist in the same surroundings. Words associated with animals have become indispensable part in human language and most of them have not only literal meanings, which are used to refer to given animals in certain contexts but also specific implicit meanings, that is, cultural connotations. According to the research (Xu, 2005; Liao & Yi, 2017), there are about 649 animal words in English and Chinese. In English, there are 258 animal words, accounting for 39.75% in total containing cultural connotations, while in Chinese, there 105 animal words, accounting for 16.16% in total carrying cultural connotations. From the statistics, it can be concluded that some animal words may have similar literal meanings in English and Chinese, but most of them have different cultural connotations. These differences may become barriers for EFL (English as foreign language) learners and cause misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, the present study aims to explore the differences in cultural connotations of animal words in English and Chinese. It is hoped that the present study can facilitate EFL learning and boost the cross-cultural communication between Chinese speakers and English speakers.

2. Animal Words and Cultural Connotations

In linguistics, a word is defined as the smallest sequence of phonemes uttered in isolation with objective or practical meaning. In the long history of human evolution and its interaction with animals, a close relationship has established between the two species and this relationship exerts profound influence on human emotions, attitudes and behaviors. Consequently, this is reflected in the language, particularly in words used by a speech community.

2.1 Definition of Connotation

A word is a pairing of form and its meaning. In spoken language, a word is regarded as the smallest unit that can be used alone. In written language, a word can represent one or more sounds which can be spoken to express an idea, refer to an object, or describe an action by people who are involved in a conversation context. A word's meaning is usually complex, consisting of such components as an image, an idea, a quality, a relationship and personal feelings and associations. And a word can have one or more meanings. According to Leech (1987), there are seven types of meanings for a word, namely: conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, stylistic meaning, affective meaning, reflected meaning, collocative meaning and thematic meaning. The present study only focuses on the connotative meaning, defined by Leech (1987) as "the communicative value that an expression has by virtue of what it refers to, over and above its pure concept content". Following this theory, connotation, in contrast to denotative (or literal) meanings, involves the emotional implications and associations that a word may carry. It is also called intension or sense. Following this perspective, it can be concluded that words do not only carry certain denotation, but also often have certain connotations.

2.2 Cultural Connotation

Connotations tend to vary for different individuals and cultures. When they are derived, added, and amplified from different cultural contexts, the cultural connotation arises. It is a subpart of associative meanings of an expression and an implicit representation of speaker's emotion, attitudes, beliefs and views toward objects, actions and surroundings. Cultural connotation is not necessarily a component of the word meaning, but the users of certain language might associate a word with its social and cultural values. The words used have come to have emotive tone, the associations, and suggestiveness of the situation. Therefore, the cultural connotation of a word is the associated or secondary meaning. It can be something suggested or implied by a word or, rather than being explicitly named or described. For example, in English the word "dog" explicitly denotes "a very common four-legged animal that is often kept by people as a pet or to guard or hunt". But it is more often than not used in everyday life to describe a person who is very lucky. The meaning of being lucky associated with "dog" is not given in the dictionary, but subconsciously or automatically occurs to a particular speaker or hearer's mind in a given context. This shows us that connotations of words, unlike denotations which are learned early in life and likely to have reference to a physical situation (Larson, 1984), are relatively changeable and vary dramatically in accordance with different cultures and individual experience.

2.3 Animal Words and Cultural Connotations

As an indispensable component of the world, animals play an important role in human everyday life. Many animals have become human's friends and they are in close relationship with human beings. Then many expressions including words, idioms and phrases are formed as a special group of words with animal names. They are ubiquitous in both English and Chinese, exerting profound influence on human beings' emotions, views, beliefs, and attitudes. Nowadays, these idioms or words have not merely been the symbols of a type of animal. In most situations, they have been elaborated by mankind, enabling people to express their emotions and ideas (Liao, 2000). That is, many of animal words not only carry denotations but also cultural connotations.

It is generally agreed that language and culture are extremely interrelated with each other. So as one of the most open languages around the world, English has never ceased in its development while assimilating other countries' cultural essence since its birth. In a result, animal words in English are bound to have abundant cultural implications. However, animal words in Chinese, with a history of about 5,000 years, have their own specific cultural connotations. That is, animal words, with rich cultural connotations in both English and Chinese, are representations of certain history and cultures. They can also reflect the customs and modes of thinking of different language users, which in the long run directly or indirectly carries the cultural traditions of different nations. In a word, animal words are endowed unique cultural connotations due to divergent social backgrounds and national conventions (Guo, 2010). So the understanding of cultural connotations about animal words is of vitality for inter-cultural communication, particularly for English and Chinese speakers.

3. Cultural Connotations of Animal Words in Chinese and English

In both English and Chinese, most animal words carry abundant cultural connotations (Deng & Liu, 1989). Some words denote the same animals as well as the same cultural connotations. But some words have the same animal images but different connotations. This section is dedicated to a comparison of most animal words in both languages.

3.1 Same Denotations and Same Connotations

Animal words develop hand in hand with human civilization. Their cultural connotations are in a close relationship with everyday living habits and customs. Although Chinese and English are differently used in different regions and countries, some animal words carry same conceptual meaning and cultural connotations since both language speakers share the same physical surroundings.

In both English and Chinese, the word “parrot” equally refers to “a tropical bird with a curved beak. Most of them have bright feathers. Some are kept as pets and can be trained to copy human speech”. As to its cultural connotations in China, the expression “*ying wu xue she*” (a parrot learning to speak) pejoratively implies a person who just repeats what others say and doesn’t have some new ideas. Similarly in English sentence like “He just parroted his father’s opinions” (Fan, 2021), the word “parrot” is used as a verb to describe a person who heedlessly follows others and repeats doing the same thing from time to time. Therefore, both “parrot” and “*ying wu*” refer to the same bird and carry the same cultural connotations.

Another example is “(mouse/rat)”. Literally in both Chinese and English, it refers to “a small animal that is covered in fur and has a long thin tail, living in fields, in people’s houses or where food is stored”. In China, there are such expressions as “*she bei*” (scoundrels), “*shu mu cun guang*” (shortsighted), and “*zei mei shu yan*”(thievish-looking), in which “*shu*” (mouse/rat) carries the derogatory meaning. The same meaning can be found in the West, English-speakers usually associate rats with disease and pestilence. When they say someone is “a rat”, they mean that he is sneaky and dishonorable. So in both Chinese and English, “mouse/rat” have the same connotative meaning.

3.2 Same Animal Words with Different Connotations

Due to the different traditions, values and beliefs in western countries and China, some animal words have quite different cultural connotations although they point to the same animals in nature. The best example is the word “dog”. In China, when it comes to the word “*gou*” (dog), Chinese people tend to associate it with the attitudes of “contempt, disgusting”. So Chinese words composed of “*gou*” usually indicate a negative emotion and imply a derogatory meaning. For instance, “*gou ji tiao qiang*” (a cornered beast will do something desperate), “*gou tui zi*” (dog’s leg), “*gou zhang ren shi*” (be a bully under the protection of a powerful person), all of them can be a sign that “dog” is an animal with a low status in Chinese culture and it represents a hateful, mean and immoral personality. However, in western countries, “dogs” are usually treated as good friends, best companions and family members. So they are used more often than not to describe people who are loyal, reliable, and sympathetic. In English, “love me, love my dog” implies the dog’s unique position in family; “a lucky dog” symbolizes

a man who is very fortunate; “as faithful as a dog” stresses a man’s loyalty. All these expressions with dog have positive meaning and imply a derogatory sense. This is quite contrary to these words in Chinese. Surely, not all English expressions composed of dogs have a positive meaning (Zhu, 2003). For example, when one man says “you are a dog”, he is not commending that you are a man of loyalty but implies a negative meaning that you are ugly or he hates you. Similarly, not all Chinese expressions with dog indicate negative sense and emotions, such as the “*quan* (another word for dog in China)” in the proverb “*gan xiao quan ma zhi lao*” (no dogs need no pains) just represents a characteristic of “loyalty”. But through the comparison between the two languages, the conclusion might be that in western countries “dog”, quite contrary to that in China, predominantly represents positive image and is more frequently treated as human’s best and loyal friend.

Moreover, in English and Chinese, the animal “owl” also has different associations and cultural connotations although they all refer to the same bird. In China, the owl is a symbol of evil foreboding. When it hoots, it foreshadows forthcoming bad luck. So there is such expression as “*mao tou ying jin zhai hao shi bu lai*” (an owl visiting a home portends a misfortune in that house) (Li, 2019). However, “owl” in western countries symbolizes wisdom and intelligence. A wise man can usually be compared to an owl and the phrase “as wise as an owl” can be frequently heard in everyday life.

3.3 Different Animal Words with Similar Connotations

Although in English and Chinese there are many animal words carrying different cultural connotations, it is also true that some different animal words have similar cultural connotations.

In China, it is well known that tiger is regarded as the king of forest and animal world. It is also a symbol of power, vigor, and courage. While in western countries, lion is the king of forest and the symbol of courage and power. In Chinese, there is the expression “*hu kou ba ya*” (pull a tooth from the tiger’s mouth), while in English they use “*geard the lion in his den*”. Both of these expressions describe a situation in which a man dares to confront the greatest danger. Another example is “*lao hu de pi gu mo bu de*” (do not touch the tiger’s ass) in China, but people in England frequently say “one should not twist the lion’s tail”. In addition, British people tend to use lion as a symbol of their country and there are such expressions as “regal as a lion, majestic as a lion”.

Besides, English “horse” and Chinese “*niu*” (ox) seem to have same cultural connotations. In China, “*niu*” stands for diligence, and “*lao huang niu*” (an old ox) is conventionally used to describe a man who is working hard all the time without any complaint. However, English speakers are prone to use a phrase “a willing horse” for such a man. In addition, Chinese speakers tend to use “*ta chui niu*” (he is bragging or boasting) to refer to a man who is bragging. On the contrary, English speakers prefer to use “talk horse” rather than “talk ox”. “He is as strong as an ox” is usually used to refer to a strong man in China, but the same meaning in English is conventionally uttered with the sentence “He is as strong as a horse” rather than “an ox”.

Certainly, there are still many other animal words which are different in conceptual meaning but similar in cultural connotations. For example, “*luo tang ji*” (like a drenched chicken) in Chinese, is “a drowned

rat” in English. A timid man is like a “rat” in Chinese but a “rabbit” in English. The English proverb “Like a cat on hot bricks” has the same meaning as a Chinese idiom “*re guo shang de ma yi*” (the ants on hot pot).

3.4 Animal Words with no Corresponding Connotations

English and Chinese belong to different language systems: the former belongs to the Indo-European family while the latter is in the Sino-Tibetan family. Due to the differences in culture, it usually occurs that the same animal contains abundant cultural connotations in one language with another one in a different language.

3.4.1 Animal Words Having Connotations in Chinese but not in English

Although no one really sees it in Chinese history, “*long*” (dragon) carries abundant cultural connotations. On one hand, dragon is the symbol of power, nobility and honor. On the other hand, it also symbolizes luck and success. Dating back to feudal times, dragon is the symbol of emperors and all the things, including clothes, chairs, beds etc. they use are named with a word “long”. It was exclusive to emperors and symbolizes emperors’ supreme power. Even today Chinese people still define themselves as dragon’s successors and their nation as “the huge eastern dragon”. Besides, there are also a large number of expressions composed of “*long*”, such as “*long teng hu yue*” (dragons rising and tigers leaping), “*long fei feng wu*” (dragons flying and phoenixes dancing)”. “*long*” in these expressions represents good luck and achievement. However, in the western countries, “dragon” is an evil and a monster, not having so abundant connotations.

In addition, in China, “*he*” (crane) and “*gui*” (tortoise/turtle) are the symbols of longevity. “Crane” doesn’t live very long on earth in itself, but it is usually described as a type of immortals in Chinese paintings and literature works, so it gradually develops into a symbol of long life-span. Unlike “crane”, “tortoise/turtle” can live very long thus being a symbol of longevity for Chinese people. But there is rarely such kind of association of these animal words in English.

3.4.2 Animal Words Having Connotations in English but not in Chinese

England is a country surrounded by water, and fishing has always been important for people’s everyday life living there. So many expressions related to “fish” are created and introduced into everyday language. The phrases like “a poor fish, a loose fish, and fish in the air” are frequently used to describe people. But unlike “dog” with a positive meaning, “fish” in English usually carries a derogatory sense, referring to certain bad people. However, in China, there is no such connotation as that in English. To be more exactly, Chinese animal “*yu*” (fish) carries no cultural connotations except that it is a symbol of prosperity for its pronunciation similar to another Chinese word “*yu*” (surplus).

Besides, in China, “*da xiang*” (elephant) is only confined to “a very large animal with thick grey skin, large ears, two curved outer teeth called tusks and a long nose called a trunk, which is used to pick up water and food.” That is, in Chinese people’s views, there is no cultural connotation for this large animal “elephant”. While in English, “elephant” carries rich cultural connotations. For example, “white elephant” can indicate a thing that is a waste of money because it is completely useless. It can also

refers to a topic that is being omitted or circumvented. The idiom “an elephant never forgets” is usually used to imply a man who has fantastic memories.

4. Conclusion

Animal words in both Chinese and English not only denote the animals’ images, but also carry profound cultural connotations. These cultural connotations indicate that there is no convergence in many aspects between English and Chinese terms associated with animals although there is universality in the use of animals with different cultural connotations across English and Chinese languages. Therefore, learning more about animal’s characteristics and habit can provide deeper insight into a given language’s culture to guarantee more successful cross-cultural communication. In that sense, language learners should not only take the words literally, but also attach much attention to learning the cultural differences between English and Chinese through reading more books, searching more information about cultures online. On the other hand, language teachers ought to integrate the cultural knowledge into their regular teaching activity and curriculum. In this way, learners have more opportunities to get deep insight into foreign cultures and then achieve a successful and smooth cross-cultural communication.

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