

*Original Paper*

## A Comparative Study of Animal Metaphors in Chinese and English

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### **Abstract**

*This study aims to make an investigation into the nature of metaphor through the cross-cultural comparison of the animal metaphors in English and Chinese. In this study, based on the GREAT CHAIN OF BEING metaphor and the principle of metaphorical highlighting (Kovecses, 2002), the comparison is made between different aspects of animal metaphors in both languages. The results show: some metaphors are identical in the image and highlighted aspects; some are similar in the highlighted aspects but different in the image of animal; some are different with different highlighted aspects of the same image. It can be claimed that metaphors are a mirror of a culture.*

### **Keywords**

*animal metaphor, great chain, cross-cultural comparison, English and Chinese*

### **1. Introduction**

Metaphor is a ubiquitous linguistic phenomenon and it widely exists in literature works, fables, everyday life and idioms. It has attracted scholars' much attention since the appearance of *Aristotle's Poetics and Rhetoric* in 300 BC. Up to now, metaphor study has spanned more than two thousand years. However, since the appearance of *Metaphors we live by* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), metaphor has started to be considered as not only a rhetoric device but also a way of thinking. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) state that the conceptual system stored in human mind is fundamentally metaphorical in nature and metaphor is in nature a sort of cognitive mechanism, through which salient aspects are mapped from a concrete domain to an abstract domain. The concrete domain is always referred to as source domain and the abstract domain is the target domain.

There are many metaphorical phenomena in each country, among which animal metaphor is an important one. People and animals are living together in the same world and they have been in frequent contact with each other. Many animals' features are found similar to people and other objects'. In this

case, many animal traits are mapped to human domain and this seems to be the origin of the conceptual metaphor HUMANS ARE ANIMALS.

Throughout time many linguists and philosophers have attached much attention to the study of animal metaphors from different perspectives. Most of them are concerned with the investigation on how words associated with animals acquire their metaphorical meaning within the discipline of anthropology or literary (Li, 2004; Xiang & Wang, 2009; Hu, 2006). And a few of these studies focus on the comparisons between two languages from cultural perspective, like English and Chinese (Liao, 2000; Zhan, 2003), Chinese and Germany (Hsieh, 2001). Very little research has been conducted on the comparison of similarities and differences between Chinese and English from cognitive perspective. This research will conduct a comparison of animal metaphor in Chinese and English on the framework of the “GREAT CHAIN OF BEING” (Lakoff & Turner, 1989), hoping that this research boosts the understanding of the differences and similarities between English and Chinese and enhances the cross-cultural communication between two nations.

## 2. Metaphor and Great Chain of Being

Ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle developed the “Great Chain of Being” concept to structure things in the universe in terms of attributes and behaviors with their hierarchical arrangement. Lakoff and Turner (1989, p. 172) state that the Great Chain of Being metaphor is “a tool having great power and scope, making it possible for us to understand general human traits by the mapping from well-understood nonhuman attributes; and vice versa. It is in fact a folk theory dealing with the way in which the things in the world are interrelated to each other.

According to the Chain, all the entities, including humans, animals, plants, complex objects, and natural physical things, are hierarchically arranged. It can be schematically represented in the following manner (Lakoff & Turner, 1989, pp. 170-171):

HUMANS  
ANIMALS  
PLANTS  
COMPLEX OBJECTS  
NATURAL PHYSICAL THINGS

From the schema, it can be concluded that the mapping can occur in two possible directions, that is, upward and downward (Krzyszowski, 1997, p. 161). The upward mapping is involved when the position of the source domain is lower than the target domain on the Chain. When the source domain’s position is higher than the target domain on the Chain, the downward mapping comes into play. Animal occupies the middle position of the Chain, implying that the Great Chain of Being metaphor is able to provide a foundational framework for why and how animal images are widely used in natural languages to highlight human characteristics and conversely, why animal images are attributed basic human traits in different languages. Martsa (2003, p. 3) argues:

from the Great Chain schema, it can be recognized that two kinds of conceptual mapping occurs: one is the mapping of humans from animal traits, the other being the mapping of animals from human attributes. In the first mapping, the traits and behavior of higher-position human are recognized by the animal's attributes and behavior of lower-level. Therefore, a plausible statement is that animal attributes and behavior are usually used to metaphorically understand human attributes and behavior.

Then how did these animal images acquire their metaphorical meanings? According to Kovecses (2002, p. 125), the only way is that human traits are firstly attributed to animals and then they are reapplied to human. Put differently, human firstly personify animals and then use human-based animal traits to understand human behavior.

### 3. Comparisons of Animal Metaphors

There are many animal metaphors in both languages. All the animal metaphors in two languages are classified as identical, similar and different categories based on the metaphorical highlighting principle (Kovecses, 2002, p. 79), which states that "the highlighted aspects of a target concept are that or those ones which are the focus of a metaphor." That is, the mappings between domains are only partial. Put simply, not all the traits, features of an animal will be mapped onto other concepts and vice versa.

#### 3.1 Identical Metaphors

Due to the same living conditions and life experience, people in China and western countries develop the similar or same attitudes and emotions towards some animal's traits, habits, appearances and behaviors. These perceptions and cognitions are possibly reflected in the metaphorical expressions people use in everyday life. If the highlighted aspects, including but not limited to size, appearance, behavior of a metaphor in English are identical with Chinese ones, they are classified as identical metaphors in this study.

It is observed that the metaphors, with the image 狼 (wolf), 狐狸 (fox), 驴 (ass), 蜜蜂 (bee) etc. in Chinese and English belong to this category. In both languages, *wolf* is an image for a malicious, cruel, and greedy person. For examples, there are the English expressions like as greedy as a wolf and *set the wolf to keep the sheep*. Similarly, there are also Chinese expressions like 狼心狗肺 (wolf's heart, dog's lung), 豺狼当道 (wolf in power), 狼子野心 (wolf's son, wild ambition). All of the *wolf* expressions in two languages show a pejorative meaning, highlighting the wolf's greedy nature and wolf's appearance, behavior and living habit are mapped onto the human domain.

Another example, the *fox* in English and Chinese is used to describe a cunning and tricky person. The most typical metaphorical expression is *He is a fox*. In Chinese, there are correspondent proverb, like 诡计多端的狐狸 (a crafty fox), and 老狐狸 (an old fox). There are still many other metaphorical expressions in English like *The fox may grow grey, but never good*, *The fox preys farthest from his hole*, *When the fox preaches, then take care of your geese* and *When the fox says he is a vegetarian, it's time for the hen to look out*. Moreover, the image *ass* is used in both languages to refer to the person who is

silly and stupid. The English expression *You stupid ass* corresponds to 你这头蠢驴 (You are an ass) in Chinese. More identical animal metaphors can be found: The *bird* in two languages represents freedom; the *bee* image is understood as a person of being busy and diligent; the *snail* is a symbol of being slow, like in *as slow as a snail*.

### 3.2 Similar Metaphors

Certainly, it is possible that in English and Chinese different animal images could represent the similar meanings in metaphorical expressions of two languages because it is the similar aspects of different animals that are highlighted in the process of mapping between animal domain and human domain. So in this study, all the metaphors with different animal images but similar meanings in English and Chinese are classified as similar metaphors.

The first pair is Chinese 虎 (*tiger*) and English *lion*. In China, tiger is usually considered as a king of the forest and the wild beasts. Since ancient time, its image has attracted Chinese very much and people in China have worshipped its majesty and admired its power. So many aspects of tiger become salient and are highlighted in Chinese. If a little boy is strong and lovely, he can be described as 虎头虎脑 (tiger head tiger brain). In this metaphorical expression, the tiger's appearance is in correspondence with a boy's head. Besides, Chinese speakers prefer to highlight tiger's nature and behavior and there are many metaphors highlighting tiger's talent, power, vigor, courage and majesty. The expression 卧虎藏龙 (crouching tiger, hidden dragon) refers to those talented people who are undiscovered. The *tiger* image in the expressions 龙争虎斗 (a fight between a dragon and a tiger), 两虎相斗,必有一伤 (When two tigers fight, one is sure to be wounded), and 虎将 (tiger general) is a symbol of courage and power. Admittedly, as a king in the wild animal world, *tiger* also make Chinese people feared of it. In this case, it is a symbol of danger, which is highlighted in the expressions like 虎口拔牙 (pull a tooth pulled out of a tiger's mouth), 不入虎穴,焉得虎子 (How a person can obtain tiger-cubs without entering the tiger's lair). In the western countries, probably because people there have little chance to get close to tigers but many opportunities to encounter lions. That is, they are more familiar with lions' appearance, traits, habits, and behaviors. So there are more metaphorical expressions with *lion* in English rather than *tiger* metaphorical expression. In another word, the *lion* image in English has the same highlighted aspects as the image *tiger* in Chinese. For example, English speakers usually describe a brave person as *majestic as a lion* or *as bold as a lion*, rather than a *tiger*. *The lion's share* is used rather than *the tiger's share*. *The lion's mouth* is the same as Chinese *tiger's mouth*. In addition, people in England even prefer to count *lion* as a symbol of their country. As *tiger* enjoys great reputation in Chinese culture, the *lion* has the same metaphorical meaning in western culture.

Besides, the image of 牛 (*ox/cattle*) in Chinese and the *horse* image in English have the same metaphorical meaning. In ancient China, agriculture played an indispensable role in people's everyday life and the country's economy. Consequently, *ox/cattle* played an essential role as an important device in farming and exerted profound influence on people's life experience. So the *ox* image in China is

mainly a symbol of diligence and commitment as in 老黄牛 (an old ox), which is conventionally applied to refer to a person who is industrious all the time and never complains about the hardships. This is the most salient trait for an *ox* in Chinese speakers. However, as to English speakers, it is not *ox* but *horse* playing a necessary role in social development. In ancient times, horses were brought up for farming, for traffic, and for race. They are treated like family members. So a diligent person is more often than not treated as a *willing horse* rather than an *ox*. Another highlighted aspect in the *ox* image of two languages is its strength. A strong person in China is usually described 壮如牛 (as strong as an ox) but in English he is *as strong as a horse*. Both languages have metaphorical expressions symbolizing a person who boasts about himself. But the mapped animals are different, that is, *talk horse* is used in English while Chinese speakers use 吹牛 (talk ox) although it is the size of body that is mapped onto human behavior.

In both languages, there are actually many other metaphorical expressions which have similar highlighted aspects but different animal images. For example, a person who has not a dry thread on one is a *drowned rat* in English but a 落汤鸡 (like a drenched chicken) in Chinese. The *rat* image refers to a timid person in Chinese but he is a *rabbit* in English.

### 3.3 Different Metaphors

In the long evolutionary history of human, there must be many same animals living together with English and Chinese speakers. But due to the divergence in geographical environment, religion, history, culture, value as well as thinking mode, both language speakers usually develop various attitudes, views and emotions towards these animals. And the different traits of animals are variably salient for one nation to another. In this case, the different aspects of one animal image in both languages are highlighted and mapped between two domains, which give rise to different metaphors.

In the long Chinese history, *dragon* has been always regarded as a holy animal. It is a type of mythical animal in the legend with horns, scales, claws and whiskers, which can fly high into the sky and dive deep into the sea, blow cloud and make rain. It is powerful and almighty like the God in western countries. It is a spiritual and cultural symbol for Chinese people who conventionally believe they are descendants of the dragon and consider their country as the oriental dragon. In this sense, the image of *dragon* is a symbol of power and nobility. The ancient emperors always believed they were the real dragons, and life necessities they use were all named with 龙 (dragon), such as 龙袍 (imperial robe), 龙椅 (imperial throne), 龙榻 (imperial bed). They are exclusive to emperors and they are representatives of majesty and power. The *dragon* image also represents luck and achievement as reflected in the expressions like 龙腾虎跃 (dragon flying and tigers leaping), 龙飞凤舞 (dragon flying and phoenixes dancing), and 鱼跃龙门 (a fish leaping over the dragon gate). While in English speaker's eyes, the *dragon* image represents a quite different picture that the *dragon* is a representative of a dangerous monster or an evil. It corresponds to Satan in western culture which is usually considered as the large red dragon. Dragon does harm to people and bring disaster to human. English speakers believe that a *dragon's tooth* is a crop of violence. When a woman is recognized as a dragon,

she is cruel and unfriendly and no one likes her (Bu, 2016). In a word, the *dragon* image in English represents an evil picture fairly different from that in Chinese.

Another image representing a different picture in both languages is the *dog* metaphors. In China, dogs are believed to eat excrement since they are born. This trait is mapped onto human domain, and there is a proverb 狗改不了吃屎 (a dog can't change its bad habit of having excrement) representing an ill-mannered or badly-behaved person who can't change his behavior. This is similar to dog's instinct. Probably due to this dog's instinct, Chinese speakers believe that 狗嘴里吐不出象牙 (no ivory comes out of dog's mouth) since dog's mouth is smelly and its teeth are dirty. The *dog* image also represents a person who is inferior, disgusting and looked down upon as in the expressions: 狗腿子 (dog's leg), 狗仗人势 (a dog counting on its master's strength), 狗眼看人低 (dog's eyes look people short). In a word, the image of *dog* in China usually represents a derogatory picture. However, this is just opposite of the image in western countries, where *dog* is treated like a family member and it is human's best friend. So the *dog* image usually carries positive sense. Dog's loyalty, faithfulness, and reliability are highlighted and mapped onto human domains. Consequently, the English expression like *as faithful as a dog* highlights a person's loyalty and faithfulness. The *dog* image is also a symbol of good luck and a *lucky dog* which describes a fortunate person.

Certainly, the *dog* image in English is not always a symbol having a positive sense. For example, the proverb *you are a dog* doesn't say that you are a reliable and loyal person but imply that you are hated by a person. The same is true to the *dog* image in Chinese, such as 千效犬马之劳 (no dogs need no pains) refers to a person who would like to devote all his life to provide service for a career, a group, or a country. This is a mapping of selflessness and commitment from dog to human. Here 犬 is another Chinese character for dog.

However, through the comparison of dog's image in the two languages, it might be found that the dog's positive image in English is predominant and more fashionably recognized as human's best and loyal friend. This is quite contrary to that in Chinese culture.

#### 4. Conclusion

The analysis made on the animal metaphors in two languages in this study finds that if not all, at least much of animal behavior and traits are highlighted to metaphorically understand human behavior. It seems that in both languages the aspects of animal images such as appearance, habit, behavior and relation to people are salient in the mapping between two domains. These aspects constitute a large body of knowledge about animals which are culture-dependent, automatically retrievable. The most fundamental part seems to be the relation between people and animals (Martsa, 2003, p. 4).

The GREAT CHAIN OF BEING metaphor provides a framework in which humans can be metaphorically understood via animals and animate things, that is the origin of the conceptual metaphor HUMANS ARE ANIMALS. This also provides explanation for the reasons and the ways in which some animal metaphors, which are obviously unrelated, conventionally appear together in a coherent

way. Moreover, this study seems to be in consistent with the view that in many contexts, animal metaphors are actually the mirror of cultural models or cultural schema. Therefore, it is claimed that a comparison between animal metaphors in natural languages is an effective way to understand the cultural differences.

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