

## *Original Paper*

# Analysis of Cultural Connotation Differences of Animal and Plant Words between Chinese and English from the Perspective of Cross-cultural Communication

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## **Abstract**

*Cross-cultural communication refers to the communication between people with different cultural backgrounds. Language in the process of communication will reflect a person's cultural background and thinking. Language is the carrier of culture, while word is the most basic unit and component of language. Nations have formed cultures with their own characteristics in the long history where the connotation of words would be affected by cultural differences. Therefore, to reduce cultural conflicts and misunderstandings, it is necessary to understand the differences between Chinese and English words. Based on the perspective of cross-cultural communication, this paper analyzes the differences in the connotation of animal and plant words in Chinese and Western cultures, aiming to further improve cross-cultural communication awareness and translation ability.*

## **Keywords**

*plant and animal words, cultural connotation, cross-cultural communication*

## **1. Introduction**

Cross-cultural communication exists when people from different cultures begin to communicate with each other. Language, culture and thinking are essential factors in cross-cultural communication. Language and culture complement each other, and the latter is the carrier of the former. The way of thinking affects what people say and do, so that people from different cultural backgrounds see things from different angles and express themselves differently. The most influential argument in this field is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which includes linguistic relativity and linguistic determinism. However, the theory of linguistic relativity has been endorsed by most scholars in general. Whorf believes that we

live in the background of a certain language where the difference in language creates a different thinking pattern to a certain extent, and then forms a difference in our interpretation of human society, which brings about cultural differences.

Chinese and English cultures are formed in different environments, so there are differences in the process of language formation. As the basic elements of language, the word of different cultures has both commonalities and national characteristics, and the differences of word are mainly manifested in their cultural connotations. As things closely related to human life, animals and plants are often used by people to express their emotions and give them different meanings. Understanding the difference of meaning in animal and plant words between Chinese and English is also helpful for translation and cross-cultural communication.

The paper includes four parts. The first part introduces the important roles of language, culture and thinking in cross-cultural communication and their relationship with each other, and further illustrates the necessity of understanding of word connotation. The second part simply analyzes the reasons of cultural connotation of words. The third part respectively introduces the cultural connotation differences in plant and animal words between Chinese and English. The last part concludes these differences between Chinese and English on plant and animal words and provides some tips for translation and cross-cultural communication.

## **2. The Reasons of the Cultural Connotation of Words**

Language is the basic component of culture, and it is an important tool to understand the cultural connotation of different countries and a very important medium to reflect a nation's cultural form. The basic element of language is word, so the differences in cultural forms are generally manifested in the most basic language level-word, so it is particularly important to compare and analyze the connotations of Chinese and English words in cross-cultural communication. Even words that express the same concept have different meanings because different peoples have different world views and religious beliefs. Only by fully understanding the cultural connotations of the word of different countries can we help us understand the languages and thinking patterns of different countries, thereby improving our awareness of cross-cultural communication.

Here we will refer to linguistic relativity which also calls the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. In 1921, Edward Sapir, a famous American anthropologist and linguist, began to propose his views of language differently. He believes that languages are diverse in how they are expressed in the real world. Whorf, Sapir's student, developed and refined this notion further from 1925 to 1941. Together, their ideas became the influential theory which is called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (CHEN, 2012).

Linguistic relativity believes that language shapes how people think and experience the world, but the influence is not absolute. Whorf provided the example of Eskimo words for snow to illustrate his argument. In Eskimo, because of their living environment, they have many words to express snow, such

as “aput” for snow on the ground, “piasirpoa” for drifting snow, “qimuqsug” for a snow drift, but in French there is only the inclusive word “neige” and even the people in the tropics don’t have the opportunity to see the snow. So when the French say snow, the Eskimos don’t understand what kind of snow they are talking about. Their culture contains many words related to snow to express other things, such as “as white as snow”, those who have never seen snow may wonder why they use this metaphor. For in the eyes of the Eskimos, snow is the purest thing in the world. Although Chinese and English culture don’t have more than 60 words for describing snow, we have “粉状雪、鹅毛大雪” and we can say “slush, powder” in English. In translation and cross-cultural communication, we can use “very white” to replace “as white as snow”.

Similarly, because of different historical development processes and religious belief, Chinese and Western cultures are influenced by their respective histories and have many seemingly similar but different aspects. At the linguistic level, we can see that many words that seem to have the same meaning in both Chinese and English have different or even diametrically opposite connotations due to the influence of their respective cultures. This not only enriches the treasure of world culture, but also brings challenges to cross-cultural communication.

### **3. The Comparisons of the English and Chinese Plant and Animal Words**

#### *3.1 Same Plant Words and Different Cultural Connotations*

Language and culture are closely related. That is because the language of a nation is inseparable from the nation's culture, and a nation's culture has a comprehensive and profound impact on its language. But as an external manifestation of thinking and culture, language does have an impact on thinking. That is to say language is the carrier of the culture it reflects. In fact, the production of language depends on the natural environment, geographical conditions, historical culture, productivity level, and especially the national culture of the place where it is produced. Differences in these factors result in differences in people's cognition and understanding of the world. This difference manifested at the language level will lead to different understandings and connotations of the same object in different languages. In turn, this kind of word with cultural characteristics also affects the way of thinking and expression of the speaker.

Both Chinese and English have a long history and belong to different generic relationship. For they belong to different cultures, they have been endowed with their own cultural connotations from the very beginning. Although some concepts have similar literal meanings, they carry the meaning in their respective cultural fields. Among them, some plant words with the same literal meaning in Chinese and English have different cultural connotations.

As the agricultural nation with a long history, China has many words related to crops. For instance, millet (粟) is a cereal crop that is grown for its seeds or hay. As one of the oldest crops in the world, millet occupies an important position in the development process of human history. China is the first

country to plant millet in the world. Millet has been cultivated in China for seven or eight thousand years. It was the main crop during the Shang Dynasty, and it was also the first of the “five grains” in ancient China. In China, millet is often used as a metaphor for small things because of its small size. For example, there is an idiom in China called “沧海一粟”. This idiom comes from the poem “First Visit to the Red Cliff” by Su Shi, a poet of the Song Dynasty. The poem said: “We are nothing but insects who live in this world but one day, mere specks of grain in the vastness of the ocean” (Zhang, 2007). Because millet is the main crop in China, there is no such concept in foreign countries. Western cultures are mostly marine civilizations, so they are more familiar with marine-related words. Just like the example of “沧海一粟”, the corresponding word in English culture is “a drop in the bucket”. In their mind, a drop in the bucket is very small.

On the contrary, there are many plant nouns that have no special meaning in Chinese but have rich associative meanings in English. If we do not understand the cultural background of the English language, it will often cause understanding obstacles or misunderstandings in translation and cross-cultural communication. For example, potatoes are widely eaten vegetables in Europe and the United States. The salty and greasy fried potato chips are deeply loved by Europeans and Americans. Therefore, potatoes have entered many meaningful idioms and common sayings in Western countries, such as: “A couch potato”, referring to those who spend most of their time watching TV with little exercise or other hobbies; “a small potato” refers to a trivial number or person, and “a clean potato” refers to a well-behaved man. A thorny issue that cannot be agreed upon is called “a hot potato”. Such potato-related examples are quite common in English. But there are very few such potato-centric words and idioms in Chinese for potato plays little role in the life of Chinese people.

Another example is lily. Since ancient times, because of the homophony to the idiom “百年好合、百事合心” that represents blessing, the lily in the eyes of the Chinese has always been deeply endowed with the meaning of harmony and elegant. People love lily for her beauty and fragrance, and they value the festive and beautiful blessings she represents, so lily is a true love, an indispensable flower in wedding celebrations, and a testimony to a happy marriage and family. Even a popular dating website is named after a lily. Giving lilies to others also represents the blessing of a happy life and family harmony (Zheng, 2016). In the West, there are many myths and stories about the origin of the lily which is more closely related to the religious culture of Christianity. From the 4th century AD, the lily was gradually put on theological colors by the godfathers and began to be used as a symbol of the beautiful soul, and then as a symbol of Jesus Christ. The white petals are a symbol of Christ’s immaculateness. Beginning in the 11th century, the theological symbol of the lily has gradually turned from Christ to the Virgin Mary, and the holy and beautiful lily has become the incarnation of the Virgin Mary. The pure lily, or *Lilium candidum*, abounds in paintings of Bible involving the Virgin. Lily, both in Western myths and legends or in religious culture, is synonymous with sacred purity. The flower language of white lily is pure and beautiful. Moreover, Westerners recognize the purity and nobility of lily from the daily

language in English-speaking countries where they use “Lily white” instead of “gild the lily” means pure white and flawless. They believed that the lily was so pure that it could be expressed without any embellishment.

Willow also has different connotations in Chinese and English culture. The “Moment of Remembrance” is a very important part of the Olympic Games’ closing ceremony, and for this year, the theme “A Willow Twig” presents the segment with Chinese characteristics in the Olympic Winter Games Beijing 2022. It became a hot topic on social media at home and abroad for a while. The media have called it a Chinese-style romance. The willow twig is a part of the willow tree, the character for the willow tree is a homophone of the character “liu (留)” in Chinese, which means asking a person to stay when bidding farewell. Thus it symbolizes the sorrow of separation. In ancient days, when two friends part, the traveling party will always receive a willow twig as a gift. Many poets used the willow to express the missing, such as “昔我往矣，杨柳依依；今我来思，雨雪霏霏” in *the Book of Songs* and “此夜曲中闻折柳，何人不起故园情” written by Li Bai. In English, “willow” also has the implied meaning of death and mourning. A typical example is the English idiom “wear the willow (服丧，戴孝)”, which refers to mourning the death of a loved one and the loss of a loved one (Zheng, 2016).

From above examples, we can see that the words may have the same literal meaning, but the connotations are different due to different cultural environment. The words used in their daily expression and thinking may confused the people with different cultural background who do not know the meaning behind the words. While in translation and cross-cultural communication, we should pay attention to it in order to avoid culture shock.

### 3.2 Same Animal Words and Different Cultural Connotations

Animals have a profound impact on the survival and development of human beings. During the thousands of years of human development, people also endowed these animals with different connotations to express their emotions. Due to the similarity of historical development and the convergence of human cognitive psychology, China and the West often have an amazing consensus on the outstanding characteristics of a certain animal, so that some animals have the same or similar associations, and the translation is also the same. However, for the different regions of life and living habits, the meanings of animals in Chinese and English are sometimes quite different, which brings obstacles to translation and cross-cultural communication.

Due to the similar ecological environment of human life and commonalities of human culture, Chinese and Western people endowed animal words with the same cultural connotation. Li Xiuping pointed out that different ethnic groups have different languages. Chinese and English are very different in terms of phonology, morphology and structure, and the users of the languages also form the various expression ways and thinking pattern. Nevertheless, there are a lot of overlaps between the two languages. They use the same image of animal in expression and thinking pattern. For example, in both Chinese and English culture, fox represents foxiness, such as “狐假虎威” and “as sly as fox”. Wolf is a kind of

greedy and cruel animal, so there exists such expression in Chinese: “引狼入室”, “狼狈为奸”, “狼子野心” and “to lead a wolf into the house”, “wake a sleeping wolf (自找麻烦)” in English. Ass has the meaning of stubbornness and ignorance, such as “驴脾气” and “make an ass of oneself (做蠢事)”. The image of monkeys is mostly naughty and mischievous. For example, Chinese use “毛手毛脚” to describe a person’s impetuous behavior. In English culture, there are the similar expressions, including “monkey business, monkey around and make a monkey out of sb”.

However, due to the influence of geographical location, economy, customs and cultural differences between English and Chinese, the meanings of some English and Chinese animal words are quite different. This also indirectly affects the way people think and express one thing. For example, cattle have been widely valued in China. Especially in the period of small-scale farming in ancient China, cattle were the main force for farming. Cattle represent hard-working, perseverance and diligence and other goodness. Because of that, people usually use the image of the cattle to express a positive spirit, such as “老黄牛”, “孺子牛”, “牛劲” and so on.

The situation in the UK is different. In the 14th and 15th centuries, in addition to farming, farmers in England and continental Europe would also do some small businesses. They send the grown grains to the market for sale. Two farmers send their grain to the market for trading during the harvest. The one who can deliver the grain to the market at a faster speed may sell for a higher price—the speed of transportation is greatly improved. Horse-drawn carts are faster than ox-drawn carts, farmers who own a horse-drawn cart can often travel further and seek better prices between several markets. Therefore, horses have always played an important role in British agricultural production. Moreover, horse was the inseparable part of knight’s life in the Middle ages, so there have been many idioms composed of horse, such as talk horse (吹牛), as strong as a horse (体壮如牛), work like a horse (像牛一样辛勤地干活), from the horse’s mouth (第一手的).

The connotation of lion and tiger is more obvious in the difference between English and Chinese. In China, the tiger is called the king of beasts, while in English the king of beasts is the lion. There are many ways to express idioms related to lions in the English language and culture: the lion’s share (最大的份额), regal as a lion (狮子般庄严), fight like a lion, as bold (brave) as a lion (勇猛如狮), beard the lion in the den (太岁头上动土、虎口拔牙), twist the lion’s tail (藐视英国、侮辱英国), see the lions (游览名胜). The original meaning of “lion” in English is: a large powerful flesh-eating animal of the cat family. It can be seen that lions play an important role in English culture. Lion images appear on the British coat of arms, on the back of coins and on the coat of arms of the British royal family.

In China, as the king of beasts, the tiger also occupies a very important position in the Chinese language and culture. In the eyes of the Chinese, the tiger is a symbol of mighty force. The tiger is brave and mighty, majestic and powerful, which makes people very fearful. Many idioms and allusions are related to the tiger, such as “如虎添翼、虎踞龙蟠、龙潭虎穴、初生牛犊不怕虎” etc. Since tigers are native to Asia, Westerners rarely have access to tigers, so for a long time they believed that lions are

the most powerful animals. Therefore, in Western culture, the corresponding image of Hood in Eastern culture is the lion. Tigers in Chinese culture and lions in English language culture correspond to each other in many cases. For example, “拦路虎” in Chinese is “a lion in the way” in English; “置身虎穴” is “put the head in the lion’s mouth” in English, “虎头蛇尾” can be translated as “come like a lion, go out like a lamb”. The tiger in these idioms has been replaced into a lion in English (Chen, 2006).

**Magpie.** English people regard the magpie as symbol of bad luck. The explanations for magpie in The Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary are that the person who collects of hoards things or chatters lot. All these explanations contain the derogatory connotations. In contrast, a magpie has a contrary symbol in China, which represents the good luck. If magpies sing near the house, people think good things are coming soon. Therefore, the Chinese often say that if magpies are chirping, and happy events will come. According to the traditional Chinese myths of Niu Lang and Zhi Nv, magpie symbolizes the love. They just met once time a year on the magpie bridge on Qixi Festival.

**Fish** has quite different meanings in English and Chinese culture. In English, fish has derogatory meaning that refers to bad things and persons. Here are some examples, poor fish (可怜的人), loose fish (生活放荡的人), a cold fish (冷漠的人) and so on. In Chinese, the letter “鱼” is homophones to the letters “余”, which has the meaning of abundance. Therefore, fish become an indispensable dish in the important festivals such as Spring Festival. Chinese people often use idioms with the word Yu to look forward to a happy family and prosperity in the new year, such as “年年有余”.

**Elephant.** In China, elephant is a mascot. In traditional Chinese culture, the letter “象” and “祥” are homophonic, so the elephant is endowed with more auspicious meanings. In Yunnan Province of China, the Dai people have always used elephants as mascots to symbolize peace, good luck, and good fortune. Moreover, ivory tower refers to the place where people receive the higher education. The reason elephant is popular in Chinese is related to the Buddhist legends. It is said that the Buddhist patriarch was the reincarnation of white elephant. On the contrary, elephant may has negative meanings in English. One example is white elephant that links to things that are useless and often expensive. This allusion comes from a folk tale. In ancient times, the king gave a white elephant as a gift to his disliked subjects, who had to spend all his money on caring for the rare animal. Elephant ate a lot, but they had no other use than to watch. Therefore, there exists such expressions in English. Elephantine means clumsy and stupid. Elephant task refers to the difficult task.

#### 4. Conclusion

By comparing the connotations of animal vocabulary and plant vocabulary in Chinese and English languages, this paper analyzes and summarizes the differences between vocabulary in different countries. As English learners, we should learn more about the differences in vocabulary between Chinese and English. In translation, a variety of methods should be sought to decipher the meaning behind the words. Some animal and plant terms have roughly the same or similar connotations in

Chinese and English, which can be translated by literal translation or annotation to preserve the original image. For example, “sour grapes (酸葡萄)”, “hold out the olive branch (伸出橄榄枝)”, “a stick and carrot policy (萝卜加大棒政策)”, “as sly as fox (和狐狸一样狡猾)” etc. In some cases, we need to free translation. “Love me, love my dog.” should be translated in “爱屋及乌” rather than the literal meaning.

Different culture backgrounds present the same or similar meanings of the same words about plants and animals. Words with different cultural loads may lead to different associations and connotations. Comparative analysis of languages can help us to study the languages of two different background cultures, so that we can better understand the differences between the two languages. Language is closely related to culture and thinking. Language is the carrier of culture and also reflects a person's thinking. Only by understanding the language connotation between different countries can help us understand the differences in our respective cultures and thinking, thereby improving our cross-cultural communication skills.

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