

A Study on Different Cultural Connotations of the Animal Words between English and Chinese in Cultural Communication

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ABSTRACT. In the long process of human history, animals have been keeping a close contact with human beings and have become an indispensable part of our daily life. As animals have different functions and play different roles in different societies of different countries, people may form different social feelings or attitudes towards them in their daily life. As a result, in different cultures, these animals and animal words may have different cultural connotations. Cultural differences exist in languages of all nations, and a good many animal words can reflect their own corresponding cultural connotations in a language especially in English and Chinese. However, due to the influence of different factors, such as history, religion and convention, animal words with different connotations may result in misunderstanding in communication. This thesis makes a comparative analysis of different cultural connotations about the animal words in English and Chinese for the purpose of helping English learners have a better understanding of the English culture, thereby reducing the conflict and misunderstanding in the cross-cultural communication.

KEYWORDS: *Connotations; Animal Words; Cultural Communication*

1. Introduction

As we all know, animals are good friends of human beings. With the development of human society, many animals have become a part of people's life. "On the account of different social cultures, historical backgrounds and geographic conditions, languages, etc., the same animal has different images in different cultures." (Chang, 1999).

What is more, all languages all over the world contain a good many words denoting animals. "Animal words are given special cultural connotations for the different social backgrounds and national conventions." (Guo, 2010). In Chinese and English, animal words with their established rich cultural connotations play an important role in intercultural communication. It is likely to result in misunderstanding in communication. For this reason, it is worthwhile to make an

analysis of cultural connotations about animal words in English and Chinese to improve English learners' ability of language using and reduce the communicative misunderstanding, and then they can have a much better understanding of Eastern and Western culture.

2. Animal Words and Its Connotation

2.1 Words and Its Connotation

Words are divided into two kinds: notional words with meaning in isolation and functional words used as mere grammatical tools. The most reliable defining property of words is that "they are the smallest free forms of a language that has a given sound, meaning and syntactic function" (Zhang, 2015).

It is agreed that a word is the combination of word-form and its meaning. Geoffrey Leech divides meanings into several types: conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, stylistic meaning, affective meaning, and thematic meaning, etc. In this thesis, we only pay attention to the connotative meaning. According to Leech (1987), "Connotative meaning is the communicative value that an expression has by virtue of what it refers to, over and above its pure concept content". That is traditionally known as connotations.

Connotative meaning or connotation is not an essential part of the word meaning, but social and cultural values might occur in the mind of particular users of the language. For example, "mother" denoting a "female parent", is often associated with "love", "care", "forgiving", "tenderness", etc. These connotations are not given in the dictionary, but associated with the word "mother" in actual context to particular readers or speakers. As a result, it is easy to understand that connotations of words are relatively unstable, vary greatly according to different cultures, historical periods, and the experience of the individual.

2.2 The Cultural Connotation of Animal Words and Its Foundation

In our daily life, we use words to associate with objects, actions, feelings and thoughts. No one doubts the important role of words in language learning, because "words make us human and when you are out of words, you are out of life." (Hu, 2003). As a part of words, animal words also play an important role in the life of human, especially in language and communication.

As two of the most widely used languages, both Chinese and English are full of animal words. "Animal words consist of animal names, phrases and idioms involving animal name. And it is estimated that there are as many as about 649 animal words in these two languages." (Liao, 2017). Some animal words refer to animals existing in nature, and others are imaginary in the literary works. What is more, many animal words have become some symbolism in people's thinking, and this symbolism can be reflected in the language and have some connotations.

As human has lived with animals for thousand years and formed a close relationship, the cultural connotations of animal words have rooted in the daily life of human beings, forming the unique animal culture of each nation. Animal words are often used figuratively and have their established cultural connotations. The connotation of animal words is influenced by different factors, such as: works, fables, people's legends, geography, history, religion and conventions, etc. and these are also their form-foundation. A lot of words, idioms and expressions denoting animals or with vivid images of animals have come into English and Chinese, and the clever use of animal words is very common in these two languages, which helps make English and Chinese vivid in image, expressive in character, and rich in flavor.

3. The Comparisons of Animal Words' Connotations in English and Chinese

3.1 Similar Cultural Connotations of Animal Words

Since all human beings live in a similar environment, both the Chinese and English people nearly have the same knowledge of animals. As a result, there are many animal words with similar cultural connotation in English and Chinese.

For example, the word "pig" and "猪" share the same cultural connotations in English and Chinese. In the West, when people talk about "pig", they prefer to think of stupidity and dirtiness. So in English there are some expressions: "make a pig of oneself (大吃大喝), and to teach a pig to play on a flute (做不可能的事)". However, people also have similar expressions in Chinese, such as: "蠢猪 (idiot)", "猪头猪脑 (stupid swine)".

Another example, as parrot (鹦鹉) is a kind of bird that can imitate people's sound, both English and Chinese people use "parrot (鹦鹉)" to refer to those people who can only imitate and follow others dependently, e.g.: "He doesn't have an idea of his own. He just parrots what others say (他没有自己的观点,只是鹦鹉学舌罢了)." (Tang, 2019). These identical animal words with similar cultural connotations show that in different cultures there exists something in common.

What is more, "Fox (狐狸)" is the symbolism of "cunning and fraudulent" in both English and Chinese. When English people say "The old man is like a fox in his daily life", Chinese people can also understand the true meaning easily. Because in Chinese, there are also some similar expressions about "fox", such as: "老狐狸 (old hand at tricky)". "Wolf (狼)" usually means greedy, savage and cruel both in English and Chinese. Such expressions, in Chinese culture, "如狼似虎 (as ferocious as wolves), 狼心狗肺 (brutal and cold-blooded), 狼吞虎咽 (wolf down)", in English culture, "as cruel as a wolf (像狼一样凶残)", "wolf down (饿狼扑食)", "wolf in sheep's clothing (披着羊皮的狼)", also have the similar connotations. (Xu, 2005)

In addition, when "wolf" is used to refer to a person, it means "a man who always ready to make sexual advances (性要求) to a woman". Therefore, in English

there is an idiom “a wolf-whistle (调情口哨)”. In Chinese, there is also such an expression “色狼 (lady-killer)”.

As we can see, the similarity of connotations of animal words in English and Chinese can make us understand each other much more easily in communication.

3.2 Different Cultural Connotations of Animal Words

Because of different cultural backgrounds, it is natural to give different cultural connotations to the same animal words and form different associations in English and Chinese.

Take “dog” as an example. As we know, dog has been keeping a very close relationship with people in the two cultures. In English, the dog is usually used to refer to someone as “a big dog (重要的人物),” “a lucky dog (幸运的人)”, etc. Moreover, “to let sleeping dogs lie” means “to make no trouble” or “not to disturb people”, “Every dog has its day” means “Every person someday will succeed or become fortunate”.

The usage mentioned above does not contain derogatory connotations in English. And these examples show that “dog” can be used to make people get the expression of friendship, sincerity and faith in English.

While the situation may be different in China, figures of speech like those are not proper in Chinese, because the word “dog” in most Chinese minds is associated with some derogatory connotations, which is reflected in a good many sayings like: “狗眼看人低 (to act like a snob), 狗头军师 (a good-for-nothing adviser), 狗东西 (son of bitch), 狗急跳墙 (a cornered beast will do something desperate)” (Guo, 2010). However, seldom but in some cases the word “dog” may also have derogatory meanings in English: a phrase like “a yellow dog” cannot be equal directly to the Chinese as “黄狗” but as “卑鄙的杂种”, other phrases such as “a lazy dog (懒汉)”, “a dead dog (废物)”, etc. are not equal directly to the animal word “狗” in Chinese either.

Besides, in Chinese and English, “bear” also has quite different associations or connotations. In English, people use “bear” to refer to the person with special ability, for example, “He is a bear at mathematics (他是个数学天才)”. However, in Chinese, “bear” usually means “cowardly and timid” (e.g. 熊样).

In addition, in English owl generally implies wisdom and calmness, for example, the phrase “as wise as an owl (像猫头鹰一样聪明)”, indicates that English-speaking people associate this bird with wisdom. In children’s books and cartoons, the owl is usually solemn and wise as well. However, in Chinese, as the sound of the owl’s hooting might cause people to draw back in fear, many people regard this bird as a sign of bad luck and a symbol of sinister things. So comes the common Chinese saying, “猫头鹰进宅, 好事不来 (an owl visiting a home portends a misfortune in that house)”.

3.3 Similar Cultural Connotations of Different Animal Words

Though there are many animal words with different connotations in English and Chinese, which may lead to some misunderstanding. However, in the two languages some different animal words also could possess the similar connotation.

We all know that China is an agricultural country. And Chinese people have been using “cow” in the farming for thousands of years, while in Britain, people used the “horse” to do farm work in the past. As a result, in Chinese, “cow” is the symbol of diligence. We often use “老黄牛 (willing ox or plodder)” to refer to a person who is working hard without any complaint, while in English the similar saying is “a willing horse (埋头苦干的人)”. To mean “brag”, in Chinese, people prefer to say “吹牛”. But in English, people would like to say “talk horse”. Chinese people also use “牛” to refer to “strong”, but English people use “horse” to refer to “strong” conventionally, e.g.: “He is as strong as a horse (他力大如牛)”.

What is more, “tiger” in Chinese and “lion” in English also have the similar connotation. The Chinese consider the “tiger” as the king of forests and it is the symbol of power and courage. While in English, “lion” means courage. In Chinese we have “虎口拔牙”, while in English they use “beard the lion in his den”. Another example is “老虎屁股摸不得”, but people will say “One should not twist the lion’s tail” in English.

More examples, to mean “urgent”, Chinese people would say, “热锅上的蚂蚁”, But English people prefer to say “like a cat on hot bricks”. In Chinese, people often use “猫哭老鼠” to mean “hypocritical”. In English, the expression “shed crocodile tears (鳄鱼的眼泪)” also has the similar meaning.

There are still many other animal words with similar cultural connotations while completely different in ways of expressing in English and Chinese, such as: “落汤鸡 (a drowned of rat), 胆小如鼠 (as timid as a rabbit or chicken-hearted), 害群之马 (black sheep), 过着牛马般的生活 (lead a dog’s life)” and “瓮中之鳖 (rat in hole)”, etc.

4. Some Main Factors Influencing Different Cultural Connotations

4.1 The Factor of History

Each nation of the world has its own special historical background which has a close relationship with words. And the cultural connotations from the history are the valuable gems of human cultural heritage. It is worth learning some historical backgrounds of English and Chinese to help us comprehend what the cultural connotation of words really means.

Different historical cultures have different influences on each nation and could reflect the rich connotations of words as well. British is one of the western countries

which gradually developed from the feudal period to capital period for such a long time in the past. Thus, there are many expressions deriving from historical events in English. For example, the phrase “John Bull” is originally used as a derogatory term to describe the typical character of British in the book “The History of John Bull”, written in 1775 by an English writer John Arbuthnot (Newark, 2001). It was used to refer to a strong, careless and savage person because the word “bull” often has the ridiculous meaning in English. However, As hours pass away, nowadays it is more likely to refer to a ameliorative symbolic image of the average Englishman, such as “John-Bullish (典型英国的)”, “John Bullism(英国精神,典型的英国品质)”, “John Bull (英国迷)” instead of its original meaning.

Moreover, in history England is governed by the Pope and the King for a long time. Then there are lots of words showing the people’s resentful feeling during this period, such as “the king and pope, the lion and wolf (国王教皇如豺狼)”, “kings and bears often worry their keepers (伴君如伴虎)”. In history, the emperor of ancient China has been regarded as a dragon, the chair of the emperor is called “龙椅 (emperor throne)”, and the emperor’s dress is called “龙袍 (imperial robe)”. “Dragon (龙)” has been the symbol of dignity, power and success in the ancient times. And the usage of the word “dragon (龙)” still exists nowadays.

4.2 The Factor of Religion

As a cultural phenomenon, religion has a great impact on people’s life which reflects people’s different attitudes towards certain admiration and taboo of each nation. It is known that Chinese culture has been deeply affected by Taoism and Buddhism, and Buddhism is the most inveterate one. While in the western countries, Christianity is the dominant religion, which influences people’s life and thoughts for several hundred years.

For this reason, the Bible has been already deeply rooted in western people’s mind, and it has had a profound influence on the social thoughts and culture of English society. For instance, as “lions” are mentioned in the Bible for their strength and ferocity, some expressions like:” a lion in the path (拦路虎)” and “beard the lion (虎口拔牙)” appear. Idioms which people quote from Bible and Christianity are also abundant, for example, it is said that Satan, the Devil, often appears as an image of a black cat, then some expressions like “Don’t let a black cat cross your path (不要让霉运降临到你头上)” appears in people’s life.

While in China, with Buddhism popular for over one thousand years, the Chinese believe Buddha can control all the things in the world. Religion and history are closely related to each other, as mentioned above, in Buddhism, “dragon” is also the symbol of power and success, so there are many Chinese idioms such as “望子成龙 (to have great ambitions for one’s children), 龙的传人 (descendants of the dragon), 真龙天子 (sons of the heaven)”. In fact, the “dragon” is only an imaginary animal, it is only a symbol created by the ancient people in China.

From these examples, it can be seen that religion or belief is one of the important factors affecting cultural differences.

4.3 The Factor of Convention

As a result of different living conventions, people from different nations obviously may have different concepts of value or aesthetic standards which can also be reflected in their language, and thereby kinds of conventional connotations of words may be formed in communication.

For instance, in Chinese, the animal word “magpie (喜鹊)” is considered as good luck conventionally, because “magpie” is pronounced as “喜鹊 (Xi Que)” in Chinese, and “喜 (Xi)” in Chinese means something good or happy traditionally. For this reason, there exists such idioms as “喜鹊叫, 好事到 (When magpies are calling, it must have good news)” (Pan, 2005). However, in some places in Scotland, a magpie is usually regarded as bad luck. 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.

People in the West have had so long a tradition of keeping pets. And for them, domestic animals such as dogs and cats are regarded as pretty valued companions conventionally. In English people have favorable expressions as follows: “a top dog (优胜者)”, “a gay dog (快活的人)”. However, in China, “dog” is traditionally regarded as a kind of disgusting animal in many people’s eyes. Naturally they have some different idiomatic expressions towards “dog” like “狗腿子 (hired thug), 狗崽子 (son of bitch)” in Chinese.

In addition, traditionally the ancient Chinese also have developed their own peculiar conventional aesthetic standards. Therefore, some animals’ connotations with conventional stories happened in their daily life can also embody the social value orientation sufficiently and the forming process of some word connotations: “亡羊补牢 (It is not too late to mend the fold even after some of the sheep have been lost)”, “狐假虎威 (as ass in lion’s skin)”, “守株待兔 (wait for windfalls)” and “兔死狗烹 (trusted aides are eliminated when they have outlived their usefulness)” (Pan, 2005).

5. The Inspiration to English Learners

5.1 The Inspiration to English Learning

In the course of learning our native language, we have learned our culture and mother tongue at the same time which are complementary to each other in the learning, and that is one of the reasons why we can learn our first language much easily and quickly. On the contrary, as an imbalance exists between the acquisitions of English and English culture in English learning, we may get misunderstood in the

cross-cultural communication.

As a result, it is very urgent to pay much more attention to improving our awareness of English culture in the learning process.

Generally speaking, after having learnt all the basic structures of the language, learners can usually communicate with others smoothly. However, in order to express themselves more clearly and appropriately in a wider range of situations they still need to broaden their knowledge of English culture sufficiently. It is not enough for an English learner just to recognize the items or recognize superficial meanings of words, as it is much more important to have a sufficient understanding of their cultural connotations in a good communication. A good English learner should not only be satisfied with the learning of phonetics, vocabulary, or grammar, but enhance the learning of backgrounds of English culture bearing in mind that the cross-cultural communicative competence is also an important duty in learning, and try the best to use them in the real communication as appropriately as possible.

5.2 The Inspiration to the Intercultural Communication

Admit it or not, to learn a foreign language well means that a person can use it to communicate with native speakers or people from other countries effectively. And that is a normal standard. Language and culture are closely linked. And neither of them can exist without the other. In order to avoid misunderstanding in the intercultural communication, it is also necessary for us to make full use of various ways to know the exact differences of different cultures clearly especially between English and Chinese. For example, to watch a good many English moves and meanwhile pay attention to the special usage of some idioms or words may be pretty helpful in an effective cross-cultural communication.

What is more, it is clear that learn to make a comparative study on the cultural connotations of words or some interesting phenomena in different cultures is also a very effective method in learning a foreign language which can also instruct people to develop the intercultural communication competence. "Learn through use and improve the cross-cultural communication awareness at any monument in daily life" is a good piece of advice for English learners both in learning and intercultural communication.

6. Conclusion

Words always have partners together with meanings or connotations in certain way. A contrastive analysis of cultural connotations about animal words in English and in Chinese has been made in this thesis. And by the comparison and analysis of animal words, it is clear that people may be easily got misunderstood in intercultural communication if they do not have much knowledge of cultural backgrounds.

Every language obtains nourishment from culture and reflects culture. Learning a language is inseparable from learning its culture, thus, it is very necessary for us to

improve and strengthen the ability of understanding of both English and Chinese cultures, which can shorten the distance between two cultures for the purpose of eliminating the barrier of communicating caused by the lack of knowledge of cultural connotations.

It can be seen that dealing with cultural connotations of animal words is a very complex problem. Thus that is why the different cultural connotations of animal words in different languages are still needed to be further explored.

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