The Comparative Analysis of Animal Words’ Cultural Connotations in Chinese and English Idioms

XIANGMIN LI and MENGJIE ZHAO

ABSTRACT

Animal words are often used to express people’s feelings and emotions both in English and Chinese, thus, these animal words is an absolutely important part of social languages and cultures. The comparative analysis method is used in this paper to classify and analyze cultural connotations of animal words in English and Chinese idioms from the aspect of cross-cultural communication. This paper focuses on the similarities and differences of animal words in both two languages and helps people to understand the language and culture better as well as avoid making cultural mistakes in the cross-cultural communication.

INTRODUCTION

Words and languages are closely related to cultures. Besides being a part of culture, language is also a tool of carrying and delivering substantial cultural information, and without language, culture would not be possible. Among factors of language system, vocabulary is the most flexible and usable one containing the largest cultural information such as history, geography, religion, customs, thought pattern, etc. Cultural connotation of a word refers to the cultural information that a word has been given by the society, including the added meaning or the implied meaning given by the society background, and the special feelings conveyed among a certain social group.

Dating back to the ancient time, animals have kept closest relationships with human beings. Along with the development and progress of human society, many animals become domestic such as being people’s pets, even that animals and human beings become intimate friends. As society develops, people relate their feelings and emotions, as well as natural phenomena to animals to represent different characters of people. Therefore, animal words are something of remarkable symbols of people’s culture. English and Chinese, as languages with a long history, both are abundant in animal words and almost all of the animal words carry their own peculiar connotation resulting from social cultures, historical backgrounds and geographic conditions. However, because of the different history and culture, the connotation of animal words

Xiangmin Li, Beijing International Studies University, No. 1, Dingfuzhuangnanli, Chaoyang District, Beijing, PRC.
Mengjie Zhao, Beijing International Studies University, No. 1, Dingfuzhuangnanli, Chaoyang District, Beijing, PRC.
in one language does not totally coincide with that in another. Therefore, animal words with rich and various cultural connotations often result in misunderstandings in people’s communications for those differences.

To understand connotative meanings of animal words well is to know the culture well. Animal words that carry cultural differences play more and more important roles in the cross-cultural communication, and those cultural differences cannot be ignored in the foreign language learning. A good knowledge of cultural differences can reduce the misunderstanding of a certain language or pragmatic mistakes to a minimum. Thus, we must realize that the accuracy of understanding and transmitting culture and the avoidance of making mistakes when we choose proper animal words to express the right information are quite urgent and necessary.

THE COMPARISON OF ANIMAL WORDS IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE

No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. On the basis of similarities and differences in cultural connotations between English and Chinese, we divide animal words into six classifications as follows:

The Same Animal Words Having the Same Connotative Meaning in Both Languages

People from different cultures live on the same globe, thus both Chinese and English people have some same knowledge of animals, which includes animal words people use often that are same in conceptual meaning and also in connotative meaning.

Eg1. Pig

In Chinese, pigs give people bad impressions like dirty, lazy, ugly, greedy, and clumsy. People always use “chun zhu, lan zhu, fei zhu, ben zhu, xiang zhu yi yang chan” to describe even curse other persons. Pigs are not decent animals in English, either, for example, “To make a pig of oneself”, “He’s been a pig about money”, “I was a fat slob, a pig hooked on cocaine”, “Pigs love that lie together”. Generally speaking, pigs have a quite bad reputation about their inborn characteristics.

Eg2. Bee

A bee is a black and yellow flying insect with a round body which makes honey and can sting you. Bees both in English and Chinese share the same connotative meaning as “busy”, “hardworking”, and “industrious”. Therefore the expressions like “qin lao de mi feng” are used to describe hardworking and busy people in Chinese. Additionally, in English, “as busy as a bee”, “Where bees are, there is honey”, “No bees, no honey, no work, no money” could be easily found.

There are also plenty of other examples. In both two languages, “ass or donkey” has the same connotative meanings like “stupid, foolish” and “obstinate”, for instance, “It is not for asses to like honey”.

The “wolf” shares the same meaning of “rapacious and fierce”, “eating something very quickly”, “hunger”, and “sexually aggressive” in these two languages. For example, “The death of wolves is the safety of the sheep”, “The king and pope, the lion and wolf.”
The Same Animal Words Bearing Similar Connotative Meanings

These words refer to the animal words that share partially same connotative meaning but differences exist.

Eg1. Fox

Foxes own the similar connotative meaning both in Chinese and English. In Chinese, we describe one person who is sly, crafty and cunning as “lao hu li, man fu hu yi”. In English, there are also many similar expressions such as “You call never fox me.” and “A fox may grow gray, but never good.” Chinese people have the same association of “fox” reflected in their mind, which is indicated in History of Han Dynasty: “Fox is suspicious. Whenever it swims across the Icy River, it stops now and then and listens to make sure it is safe. So a suspicious person can be called foxy.”

But in Chinese, besides those, we also regard some women who are beautiful, sexy, and immorally mannered as “fox”. They usually use their beauty and charm to attract and lure men. In English, we can hardly find this meaning.

Eg2. Tiger

A tiger both in two languages shares the similar meanings as “dangerous, ferocious, cruel and ruthless”. We can easily find sentences like “Ride a tiger”, “To arouse the tiger in somebody’s nature”, and “How can you catch tiger cubs without entering the tiger’s lair”. In Chinese there are also some expressions like “hu kou”, “xiao mian hu”, “ru lang si hu”, “hu shi dan dan”, etc. We still describe daring or fierce woman in tiger in both languages. When we say “the female tiger”, we usually mean a woman who is fierce.

However, in Chinese culture, tiger is regarded as the king of all animals. Tiger has many positive connotative meanings like “brave and courageous”, “power and dignity”, and “vigor”, for instance, “hu jiang, hu fu”, “hu wei, yi shan bu rong er hu”, “hu tou hu nao, huh u sheng qi”. Generally speaking, the Chinese emphasizes the positive aspect of “tiger”, but English focuses on its negative aspect.

The Same Animal Words Having Totally Different Connotative Meanings

Since Chinese and English have different origins, how people live, think, talk, and write are in different ways. Therefore some same animal words are used to express completely different connotative meanings.

Eg1. Bat

In Chinese, the second Chinese character in “bian fu” produces the same sound as “fu”, which means luck, fortune, and happiness. Thus the bat is regarded as a lucky animal. We can easily find a picture having five bats on it, especially during the New Year Celebration, which means “wu fu lin men”.

However, in English-speaking countries, bats are treated as evil. Since western legendary, bats are related to evil and ugliness. There are some idioms about bats such as “as blind as a bat”, “crazy as a bat”, “have bats in the belfry”, etc. They are all negative meanings.

Eg2. Bear

Chinese people think of bears as stupid, clumsy, timid animals with huge bodies. For example, in Chinese colloquial language, we have “xiong bao”, “qiao ni na xiong yang”, “hu bei xiong yao”, and “xiong xia zi”.

In English, people think of a bear as a large or ill-mannered person. Therefore, in English, “as sulky as a bear” and “like a bear with a sore head” suggest people who
have bad tempers and attitudes. Meanwhile in English economics, a bear means the person who wants to benefit by selling stocks in high and buying it in low. A bear market means the price of stock is decreasing.

The Different Animal Words Bearing Same or Similar Connotative Meanings

Although people from China and western countries grow in different living environments, human beings always have basic needs to express same feelings like timidity and happiness. That is the nature of man. In accordance with the different animals in different places and the different nature of animals people find, some different animal words express same or similar connotative meanings.

ANIMAL WORDS SHOWING THE CULTURALLY CONNOTATIVE MEANING OF “TIMIDNESS”

In English the animal words like “chicken, sheep, and rabbit” can be used to indicate “timidness”. For instance, “as timid as a rabbit”, “chickenhearted, chickenlivered, a chicken guy”, and “Immediately Henry, who a minute before had seemed dignified, took on sheepish smile”.

In Chinese, animal words like “shu”, “gui” suggest culturally connotative meaning of “timidness”, for example, “dan xiao ru shu”, “suo tou wu gui”.

ANIMAL WORDS SHOWING THE CULTURALLY CONNOTATIVE MEANING OF “BRAVE” OR “STRONG”

The culturally connotative meaning of Chinese tiger can often find its equivalence in “lion” in English, for example, “lionhearted” can be replaced by “hu dan”. Both of them mean bravery.

MORE EXAMPLES OF ANIMAL WORDS SHOWING THE SAME CULTURALLY CONNOTATIVE MEANINGS

There are still some other animal words of this type such as “like a cat on a hot brick” and “ju cu bu an, re guo shang de ma yi” to indicate “anxiety or uneasiness”; “as mute as a fish” and “jin ruo han chan” to indicate “quietness”; “drink like a fish or horse” and “niu yin” to indicate the “great capacity to drink”; “slippery as an eel” and “xiang ni qiu yi yang hua” to indicate “slippery”; “lead a dog’s life” and “niu ma bu ru de sheng huo” to indicate “a hard life”, “black sheep” and “hai qun zhi ma”, etc.

Chinese Animal Words with Vacant Connotations in English

There are some local animals and culture existing in China that English countries do not have. Thus, those connotations of animal words are vacant in English.

Eg1. Crane
This animal is a kind of water bird who is white and has a long neck. It looks beautiful. In Chinese, “he” is usually used to describe people who have long life, or who are distinguished and outstanding in a group of people, or who lead a leisurely and comfortable life, or who have a pure heart and few worldly desires. So we can easily find the cultural connotations of crane like “longevity or long life”, for example, “song
he yan nian” in Chinese. The white color of the crane represents healthy old man. Chinese like to use it to describe old people such as “he fa tong yan, he fa song zi”. When we praise an outstanding person, we usually say him or her “he li ji qun”. People who are living in seclusion and enjoying life freely are described as “xian yun ye he”.

Eg2. Mandarin duck

In Chinese culture, mandarin duck has long been regarded as the symbol of faithful and lasting love because the female and male mandarin duck will never separate from each other, for example, “zhi xian yuan yang bu xian xian”. It can also refer to things in couple such as “yuan yang bing, yuan yang zhen”.

Eg3. Sparrow

In Chinese culture, the sparrow means “a person who chatters”. Besides, sparrow can refer to things which are rather small but complete and rich inside, for instance, “ma que sui xiao, wu zhang ju quan”.

Eg4. Tortoise

Tortoise’s cultural connotation is “longevity and long life”, which we usually say in Chinese like “gui shou, gui ling, gui he xia shou”. However, tortoise is also a symbol of the cuckold, or a tortoise egg, or “timidness”, which are quite insulting.

English Animal Words with Vacant Connotations in Chinese

There are also some particular animals and culture in English countries that China does not have. Thus, those animal words are vacant in Chinese.

Eg1. Cat

Cats in English mean women who are vicious, spiteful and always speak ills of other people, for instance, “His mother was catty and loud”, “See how the cat jumps”, “A cat has nine lives”, “fat cat” (rich and powerful), “A cat may look at a king”, “barber’s cat” (weak), “a cool cat”, “a copy cat”. “Who will bell the cat?” (Who will stand the risk), “At night, all cats are gray.” (It is hard to tell devil in the dark).

Because of those differences between Chinese and English, Chinese people can hardly understand those expressions without learning English culture.

Eg2. Crocodile

In a lot of stories crocodile is said to shed tears. However, people think that crocodiles weep either to attract a victim or when eating one. Thus in English, “crocodile” gets the culturally connotative meaning of “a person who pretends to be sad or sorry” and the expression “crocodile tears” has the cultural meaning of “an insincere display of grief or false tears”, for example, “take no notice of her crocodile tears”.

Eg3. Beaver

The “beaver” is a species to North America, but it is not widely known in China. Beavers’ constant activities and habits are gnawing down flees and building nests and their skills in doing those have earned for themselves the culturally connotative meaning of “a person who is anxious to get something done, working hard, and is somewhat impatient”, for example, “eager beaver”, “work like a beaver”.

Eg4. Ostrich

“Ostrich” is an exclusive worldly largest living bird of Africa. It can run very fast. When it is chased by enemies, it becomes extremely panicky. It usually buries its head in the sand, thinking that it will be safe because he can’t see the enemy and his enemy can’t see him, either. Therefore, in English, “ostrich” gets the cultural connotation of “people who try to avoid terrible situations by refusing to face them”. For example, “ostrich trick”, “ostrich belief”, “ostrich policy”.
CONCLUSIONS

Animal words have their own features and cultural connotations in their own languages. Learning connotations of expressions well can make the communication less mysterious. Through the above analysis, we hope that this paper will make people aware that learning a language is not only learning about its denotations of expressions, but also the connotations of culture-loaded words and help people to get a better understanding of languages as well as cultures.

REFERENCES