

# On the Differences between English and Chinese Animal Words Cultural Connotations\*

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**Abstract**—A social language could reflect culture which is correspondent and its manners show in the contents of words and vocabulary. The same to the animal words what contains rich and profound cultural customs of various nationalities and reflects the philosophical and cultural mentality of all ethnic groups profoundly. In the course of the development of human history, animals keep in touch with human beings. Many animals yet have been being human beings' pets and friends. Many animals have formed a certain symbol in the minds of people, and are embodied in the language. Animal words are also forming a specific meaning in these processes. There are abundant words in English and Chinese with large number of animals as a metaphor. The cultural diversity of all nations around the world causes people to have different emotional attitudes towards animals in the different cultures, thus, the meaning of animal vocabulary is different in different cultures. It's helpful to improve the communicative competence of English for the understanding of the cultural connotations of English and Chinese. To promote English learning and intercultural communication is of great practical significance.

**Index Terms**—animal words, cultural connotations, cultural differences

## I. INTRODUCTION

Language is the cultural carrier and the tool which could communicate. Language is “the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols”. (Hall, 1959) After the evolution of history, language is abundant in a variety of cultures. At the same time, words tend to be branded with culture and the same word has different or opposite meanings in different language environments. It is defined that the implication of a word, apart from its primary meaning in the *Longman Modern English Dictionary*. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* defines the word connotation as: “the suggesting of a meaning by a word apart from the thing it explicitly names or describes.” On the one hand, the similarities have the same meaning to the same animal words between the imagination of English and Chinese culture and the way of thinking. For example, the English word “fox” denotes “wild animal of the dog family, with reddish brown fur, a pointed face and a busy tail.”(Homy, 1997) On the other hand, due to the personality of the national culture and the different cultural background of the English and Chinese people, the same animal will have different associations and the same animal has different meanings. Animal words, in addition to their literal meaning, on behalf of the animal itself and have abundant cultural connotations. That is the implied or incidental associative meaning of the word, the metaphorical meaning, the symbolic meaning and emotional commendatory and derogatory.

In the course of the development of human civilization, people are contact with animals frequently what causing there are a lot of words that reflect the name of the animal in the human language. Their image, vividness and intuition have greatly enriched the human language. According to Lian Shuneng(1997)and Wu Guohua(2000), animal words belong to the category of culturally-loaded words. Generally, people cannot compare with animals, but there are many words in language which make use of the characteristics of animals to depict the personality of a person in the daily life. Owing to the life customs, religion and values, the words express the same animal symbols which have different cultural connotations under their unique cultural traditions. These differences have a reflection in the animal words. Without understanding these differences, you can't full accept the amount of language information that a word carries. The meaning of the same animal word is different in Chinese and English. An animal word in Chinese has a variety of expressions in English and has its own cultural connotations. “Cultural meanings are additionally expressed through complex process of semantic extension and transfer” (Bonvillian, 1993) Words in English and Chinese reflect the characteristics of the two ethnic cultures in varying degrees. Clarifying the cultural connotations of English and Chinese animal words helps us to understand and master the communicative language and communicative changes in English. And it can be properly expressed in verbal communication to improve our communicative competence in English. Sometimes, English and Chinese aim to express the same meaning what use diverse animal words. Thus, an analysis of the cultural connotations of English and Chinese animal words is necessary to carry out crossing cultural communication smoothly and better mastering English language. To explore the cultural connotations of animal words between English and Chinese is the theme of this thesis.

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## II. LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

### A. Definition of Language

Language is very common and essential in human life because every day we use language to communicate with other people and to commute views and express feelings. Many linguists from different points of view give varied statements of language by its definition.

First, language can mean a person's words, as in "what he said sounds reasonable enough." Secondly, Sapir indicated "language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotion and desires by voluntarily produced symbols." (Sapir 1921)<sup>1</sup> Thirdly, Martin Heidegger points out "Language – as of primary significance for the existence of man, language serves a home of existence." The statement means that only speech can give human beings the existence of living. Language used by mankind has only the unique features of human communications.

### B. Definition of Culture

Culture is an extremely complicated and enormous subject. A common view of culture is that of something learned and then passed down from one generation to the next through human actions and linguistic communication. A wide range of things are involved in culture both in physical and spiritual worlds. Sapir points out "Culture may be defined as what a society does and thinks". (1921)<sup>2</sup> The scholar's definitions to culture all point to the fact that culture has extensive and universal implication. Culture is the precipitation of temporal acquired by lots of people in the process of generations by means of individual and group striving.

### C. Word and Its Connotation

Word is a small unit of expression which has general intuitive discrimination by native-speakers. Animal words have an important role in communication. Meaning is the only carrier where words and language are related to the real world. Leech divided meaning of language into several types: conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, and stylistic meaning ect. This is a great discovery, which makes people more conscious of the constitution of meaning in order to comprehend the meaning of the language better.

Conceptual meaning also called cognitive meaning which is supposed to be the main factor in linguistic communication. The functions are to designate or describe something and the meaning network and the main foundation of cultural connotation is the nucleus. We must know its definition if we study connotative meaning. Leech's explanation is: "Connotative meaning is the communicative value an expression has by virtue of what it refers to, over and above its purely concept content"(1989)<sup>3</sup>. Its characteristics are that connotative meaning is precipitation of culture though some persists generation after generation. Associative meaning contains the elements of cultural backgrounds and is liable to the influence of geography, history, religion and customs, ect. It belongs to secondary meaning which supplement to the conceptual meaning.

Words can also be used to relay culturally shared symbolic meaning through contextual associations. Some identical animal words have diverse connotations in various nations on account of different value orientations. Dealing with the connotations of animal words is useful for us to know about the cultural factors. The reason is that language derives from the real life and reflects the real life. Similarities and differences in the connotations between two languages should be taken into account in cross-cultural communication.

### D. Relationship between Language and Culture

Language lays the basis of the culture. In 1988, Samorner and Porter remark "Language is a reflection of culture, and culture is a reflection of a language."(1988)<sup>4</sup> culture is entirely a portion of the interaction in language and thought. Scholars admit that culture is inseparably intertwined with language and the formation of culture cannot be separated from language. Language is the vehicle of culture and is also a means of communication.

#### 1. Language as the basis and carrier of culture

Language is a unit of culture, and it is also a crucial expression of culture. Language is the consequence of culture and is the prime means for human beings to study culture. Language is a picturesque characteristic of humanity and it is also a symbol system which is regarded as a symbol of cultural value.

#### 2. Culture as the controller of language

Culture influences intensively language owing to a mirror of culture. The development of language often embodies the cultural change. Language is deeply engrained with traces of special society and the meanings of language must be decided by their cultural contexts. Learning a foreign language inevitably concerns foreign cultural learning. There is a conclusion that the changes of language often are caused by some cultural factors due to the relationship between language and culture. The Chinese culture and English culture referred to different cultures. Therefore, the comparative study of different cultures should be emphasized.

<sup>1</sup> Sapir, E. *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* [M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1921:8.

<sup>2</sup> Sapir, E. *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* [M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1921:233.

<sup>3</sup> Leech, G. *Semantics*. Suffolk: The Chaucer Press, 1989:17.

<sup>4</sup> Samovar, L. A. *Communication Between Cultures.(third education)* [M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1988:96.

### III. THE COMPARISONS OF THE ENGLISH AND CHINESE ANIMAL WORDS

Different countries have different associations of animal words on account of differences in geography, history, convention and religion. Similarities and dissimilarities in the connotations of animal words in two languages (Chinese and English) should be considered in cross-cultural communication.

#### A. *Animal Words with Similar Cultural Connotations*

Identical animal words may have similar cultural connotations between English and Chinese which are completely correspondent, and different animal words may also have similar cultural connotations.

##### 1. Identical animal words with similar cultural connotations

Both the Chinese people and English people almost have the similar knowledge of animals because of all people live in the similar environment. They put the similar cultural connotation to animal words. For example, "Fox" has the similar connotations of culture between English and Chinese. It symbols "cunning and fraud". Chinese people can understand the meaning of the sentence correctly when English people say he is as artful as a fox. They share the similar comprehension about the similar term in spite of people of different cultural backgrounds have different approaches of perceptions.

##### 2. Different animal words with similar cultural connotations

Different animal words have similar cultural connotations both in English and in Chinese. In China, "cow" is the main animal to cultivate the land. But in Britain, horse is used for most farming work and usually regarded as the symbol of diligence. When we reshape a strong person, we say "壮得像一头牛". While in English, people choose "as strong as a horse". The Chinese regard the "tiger" as the king among beasts and which symbols power and courage. But in English, "lion" represents courage. "Tiger" and "lion" have the similar cultural connotations

#### B. *Identical Animal Words with Partially Similar Cultural Connotations*

Culture has great effect on the people's view and thought. In the same environment, different nations have themselves experiences in the objective world. Therefore, the identical animal words have partially similar cultural connotations inevitably. In English and Chinese, "bee" and "蜜蜂" have similar cultural connotations. They are both used to depict diligent person, for instance, "as busy as a bee (非常忙碌)". In spite of the quantity of animal words with partially similar cultural connotation is rather limited, they express the similar meaning on some situations and a different one on other situations in different cultures.

#### C. *Identical Animal Words with Different Cultural Connotations*

English and Chinese people have different attitudes to towards the identical animals. It is common that identical animal words possess remarkable cultural differences in English and Chinese. For example, In English culture, "cat" usually represents the malicious woman. "Cat's paw" refers to what other people use to do dangerous or unpleasant things. In Chinese, "cat" is a friendly domestic animal. When we say "she is a cat", the Chinese would consider that she is lovely or useful. They usually take cats as lovely pets or intimate companions in their life,

Identical animal words with different cultural connotations have some pitfalls that they look like the same but practically have distinctions. "Dog" is the persuasive example to show this sort of cultural differences. The English and Chinese have different cultural connotations to the identical animal words because of their different cultural backgrounds.

#### D. *Unique Cultural Connotations in One Language*

##### 1. Animal words with the rich connotations in Chinese, but vacant in English

The cultural connotations of animal words only embodied in Chinese which is facily understood by Chinese people. For example, "鹤"(crane) and "Cicada"(蝉) have abundant connotations of culture only in Chinese, but vacant in English. In Chinese, "鹤"(crane) refers to longevity. However, in English, "crane" only means "large bird with long leg, neck and beak". In Chinese, cicada on behalf of frustration and mourning and implies "loftiness". But in English, "Cicada" has no such abundant connotations of culture.

##### 2. Animal words with the rich connotations in English, but vacant in Chinese

Both English and Chinese have expressions associated with their respectively national culture. "Beaver"(河狸) and "Beetle"(甲壳虫) have rich cultural connotations only occurred in English, but Chinese vacancy. "Beaver"(河狸) in Chinese, is only a sort of animal. While in English, it has sophisticated technique and creative ability in making a nest. "Beetle"(甲壳虫) in English means clumsiness and foolishness and stands for a silent person, while in Chinese, "beetle" is only a kind of insect.

A common animal word influenced by the national cultures which has various cultural connotations in one language but it is just a symbol in another language. When people in one country send messages, people in another country don't understand or misunderstand just on account of the words with especial cultural connotations. Thus, we should lay more emphasis on the animal words with unique cultural connotations merely in one language.

### IV. FACTORS INFLUENCING DIFFERENCES OF CULTURAL CONNOTATION

English and Chinese animal words express different cultural characteristics and information of their own nations, and reflect their own cultures. The following analysis may be helpful to understand factors influencing differences of cultural connotation.

#### A. Geography

There are many cultural differences in terms of English and Chinese animal words which originate from the differences in the geographical environments of the two countries. Britain is surrounded by waters and British like ocean and many relevant things very much. There are many words and phrases about navigation and fishery in English. As is known to everyone, China belongs to inland country. Many expressions have to do with farming and hunting.

We conclude that thinking pattern of people is different from the value system by the contrast of the geographical environment. Britain is an island country with a distance from any point to the sea not more than 120 kilometers. They putted an emphasis on individualism and wanted to conquer nature. However, Chinese people devote themselves to study and get rich. They attach importance to the development of agriculture and are satisfied with their simple life. This semi-closed geographical environment makes Chinese people have the philosophy of Harmony between Heaven and Man. We can see that the factors of geographical environment cause these differences. When we study the animal words, we shall more emphasize the geographical factors that are useful for us to comprehend the cultural connotations.

#### B. History

Different countries have various history cultures, which mainly involve myths, ancient books and records, ect. The connotation of culture is the seed of human cultural heritage from history. Knowledge of the historical background of English and Chinese may contribute to understand the meaning of cultural connotation. The Pope and the King ruled England for a long time so there are so many dialects to express their anger, such as “Kings and bears often worry their keepers (伴君如伴虎)”. China has 5000 years of cultural tradition. In ancient China, the King considered as a dragon.

#### C. Religion and Belief

Religion belongs to cultural phenomenon. Language is a mirror of the religious culture. Therefore, many expressions comprise the religious coloring of different nations. In the English-speaking countries, Christianity has a profound bearing on people's manners of life and opinions for several hundred years as the primary religion. In China, Buddhism has been prevailed several thousand years. The Chinese think Buddha all of the things around the world are grasped by Buddhism. Different religions and beliefs will give different meanings to different animal words and use the animal words with special national significance. The belief of religion is the crucial factors to affect cultural discrimination s.

#### D. Convention and Value

Conventions and values are the reflection of the cultural awareness for a long time. Every nation has its own established and recognized convention and value. “owl” in English symbols wisdom. However “owl” in Chinese is usually related to disaster and death in China. Different nations have varied psychology and attitudes owing to their own particular value. Cultural connotations of animal words are different between English and Chinese is clear owing to the different ways of comprehension and observation of the world. Convention and value may be useful to avoid the misunderstanding in the communication.

### V. IMPLICATIONS

#### A. Applying Comparative Study to Learning Cultural Connotations

Comparative study is an effective way to learn cultural connotations. Through comparative study, we learn that in most occasions we use various animal words in English and Chinese to express the similar cultural connotations in respective language. By comparing the contrast between the source culture and target culture, learners can know where the bewilderment is and facilitate the language learning. And through the comparative study, one can understand the personality and commonness of culture and reduce the impact of culture.

#### B. Suggestion on Translation

The cultural connotations of animal words often cause the misunderstanding in the process of translation if we are not familiar with the cultural factors. Every nation has its own cultural background, translation problems what are restricted by cultural factors due to the cultural differences. Applying comparative study of cultural differences to translation is important. The cultural connotations can be well handled is the key in the process of translation.

##### 1. Identical animal words with partially similar cultural connotations—literal translation

Literal translation is a kind of method to follow closely the form of the source text and the target language readers can get more information from foreign culture. Adopting the literal translation is a better method to express the literal meaning and cultural connotation which is faithful to the original text. Such as: cowboy(牛仔), a dark horse(一匹黑马). Target language readers can acquire it because the high integrity of the cultural meaning transferred from the source text and a rather high degree of the effectiveness in the course of translation. Through literal translation, more expressions of English have now been received by the Chinese.

## 2. Identical animal words with partially similar cultural connotations—literal translation with footnotes

To minimize the opportunity of misunderstandings of literal translation, the literal translation with footnotes is applied in the translation. Adding footnotes can help not only to strengthen the advantages of literal translation, but also to increase the validity of cross-communication in the course of translation. The literal translation with footnotes is a better way to add the disadvantage of literal translation for the identical animal words with partially similar cultural connotation. The literal translation with footnotes can provide a broader cultural vision to them. Of course, too many footnotes will thwart reader's appreciation of the original as a whole. So translators must make the footnotes concise, accurate so as to maintain the integrity of the source language text and the coherence of the target language text in the process of translation.

## 3. Identical animal words with partially cultural connotations—substitution

Substitution refers to the way of replacing the original image with a ready target language image. For the identical animal words with partially cultural connotations, it is a desirable way to adopt a substantive image in the target language. The target language cannot wholly express the cultural images in the course of translation. By adopting the substitution, target language readers facilely comprehend the ideals of the original work. The reason is that readers are acquainted with their own cultural expression.

## 4. Unique cultural connotations in one language—explanation

Some cultural images are special to one culture, and the target language readers cannot comprehend or accept these unknown images. On this occasion, we transfer the meaning and change the form by adopting the way of explanation. When we translate the unique cultural connotation in the original work, there is no equivalent word which is only used to explain in target language. As for the overlapping parts of two cultures, each person who has no difficulty to understand that part which still has a large part in the two cultures that is specific. This specific part cannot be easily comprehended by target language readers without explanation. Explanation is used to express the special connotations of the source language for the animal words with unique cultural connotations in one language.

## VI. CONCLUSION

No words can be found in almost isolation. They nearly always have partners together from meanings in particular ways. People of different cultural backgrounds tend to give different meanings to language by comparison. Culture provides life and nourishment to every language. Through having a comparison in the differences between the native culture and target culture, learners can know where the puzzled parts are. In the meantime, the combination of language and culture helps to fully excavate the influence of the subconscious on the development of cultural quality. It is very necessary for us to improve and strengthen the comprehension of English and Chinese cultures. Shorten the distance between two cultures can eliminate the barrier of comprehension which caused by the lack of knowledge or cultural connotations in two cultures.

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