

The Cultural Differences of "Animal" in English and Chinese Expression

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Abstract: In the elements of language structure system, vocabularies and cultures have the closest relationship. While English-Speaking and Chinese-Speaking nations have their own cultures, their cultures show great differences because of the geographical environment, customs, ways of thinking, living habits and so on. And the differences can be reflected in animal words. Through the reveal and research of the cultural meaning of animal words, we can not only avoid pragmatic errors in actual communication, but also can give certain theoretical and practical significance for the comparison of the English-Speaking and Chinese-Speaking cultures. By the comparison, people can understand the historical and cultural differences of animal words in the English-Speaking and Chinese-Speaking cultures, which can help people have a better understanding of language and culture.

Keywords: Expression; Cultural difference; Comparison; Animal words

1. Introduction

Every nation has their own culture, and the culture is formed from the specific historical conditions, geographical locations, natural environment and social reality. At the same time, the culture is the basis of language, so the differences of the different cultures will inevitably be reflected in the different languages. Words are the closest connection point of human beings' languages and life experiences. Animals have a profound impact on the human development. People often express their emotions by animal words. The paper makes more detailed classification to clarify the cultural differences by comparing the same animal words in English to those words in Chinese and the same or similar expression in English and Chinese with different animal words.

2. Leading Factors to the Cultural Differences of "Animal" in English and Chinese Expressions

Animal words have different expressions in English and Chinese cultures. What are the main reasons causing the cultural differences in the expression of animal words?

2.1. Geographical and conventional factors

As we all know that the English-Speaking and Chinese-Speaking people live in a completely varying natural environments, and the social developments of different nations are individual. The animals in those geographical different places play different roles, so the expression of animals are different.

Different nations have the marked cultural differences in aesthetic standards and the concept system of values as a

result of living in different conventions. For instance, magpie is an animal of good luck in China because of the pronunciation of its name-"xǐ què" in Chinese phoneticize. "xǐ" means the good wishes and happiness in Chinese. But in the places of Scotland, if one magpie flies near the window, that's the symbol of bad luck. And in some places of England, if someone meet with one magpie, he has to avoid the bad luck by spitting three times.

2.2. Religious and historical factors

As one key component of the human cultures, the religion reflects the different attitudes toward the universal ethical principle orientations and the nation's taboos. Just because of influencing by different religions, the expression of animal words may totally different in the English-Speaking and Chinese-Speaking countries.

Culture has the continuous development in the history of myths, poems, ancient books and records. The cultural differences of animal words between the English-Speaking and Chinese-Speaking countries are formed gradually in the history of different nations. Learning the different history cultures are very significative, and knowing the historical background of the English-Speaking and Chinese-Speaking countries could help us understand the cultural difference of animal words deeper.

3. The Same Animal Words with Commendatory Meaning in English, but with Derogatory Meaning in Chinese

The same animal word may has the same conceptual meaning in the two languages, but it has the different connotations. Sometimes the animal words are expressed

by commendatory in English but derogatory sense in the Chinese.

3.1. Dog

The word “dog” is one representative example in the two cultures. The basic meaning of dog in English and Chinese language is consistent, which says it is an animal has four legs, can be domesticated and guard the house, but its cultural connotation has large differences.

Dog in most cases of English is a commendatory term and even enjoys the honor of man’s best friend. In most English-Speaking countries, many people love dogs like love their life and they regard dogs as friends. And their society also has a large number of businesses for dogs, which providing service for dogs, such as pet stores, pet restaurants, veterinary clinics, pet beauty salons and pet boarding hotels. Dogs are very popular among people in the west, and the loving of dogs has also become an important part of their traditional culture in their nations. As the metaphorical object in the English statements, dogs can be seen almost everywhere, such as “Every dog has its day” means every person someday will become or succeed fortunate, “to let sleeping dogs lie” means to make no trouble or not to disturb people. All these examples don’t have the connotation of derogatory. Such usage shows that “dog” can be met people’s desire for friendship, faith and sincerity.

Dogs have a long record in the language of Chinese. At the beginning of the Eastern Han Dynasty, the first monograph about definition-“*erya-shiyi*” has the explanation about dog. But in Chinese society, the main effect of keeping dogs is for guarding against thieves, not for affections. Although dogs are pets in some places now, but the image of the dog is hard to be changed into good. Generally in the Chinese spirit, dog is a kind of filthy animal, it always be linked together with the image of the evildoer and bad thing, containing strong derogatory sense in the use of Chinese idioms and two-part allegorical sayings.

3.2. Owl

In fact, owl is the beneficial bird. It’s body is light brown with many black spots, and its head has corniform feathers. It always hides somewhere in the daytime and comes out at night. Its foods are small animals, such as mice and sparrows.

The owl has the expression of very intelligent in English nations. There is a saying in English “as wise as an owl”. In the Cambridge International Dictionary of English, there is a sentence used to explain the usage of owl-“owls are often considered to be wise”.

On the contrary, in Chinese traditional culture, the owl is not a popular animal. Chinese culture calls the owl-bird of ill omen because of the deplorable sound coming from the owls when they have the action of predation, standing

for boding of evil. Chinese always interrelate defunct with the sound of owl in the folklore, and if one heard the sound of owl in the woods, that means there would be a dead person at his family in the following days.

The owl in English expression always be used in metaphor by its looks and appearances, such as the connotation of night: an owl train or an owl show. And in Chinese expression, people always extend the metaphor from its colour and luster, whereabouts and sounds.

4. The Same Animal Words with Commendatory Meaning in Chinese, but with Derogatory Meaning in English

The same animal word may has the same conceptual meaning in the two languages, but the word has different connotations. Sometimes animal words are expressed by commendatory in Chinese but derogatory sense in English.

4.1. Dragon

Dragon is an animal in the myths and legends of both English-Speaking and Chinese-Speaking cultures. The auspicious dragon in Chinese and the vicious evil dragon in English are in stark contrast.

In Chinese culture, the dragon is a symbol of auspiciousness, authority, dignity and prosperity. In the feudal society of China, the dragon was the symbol of the emperor, and emperor was called himself “the Real Dragon”, which meant the son of the heaven. Some Chinese think that the dragon is the totem of the nation. There are a large number of idioms about dragons in Chinese words. These words show the cultural connotation of the dragon in Chinese culture. Chinese dragon has the evolution of auspicious.

In western myths and legends, dragon is the symbol of evil. It is a giant lizard with squamas and a long tail of snake. It can spray fire from the mouth with opening wings. In the Book of Revelation, dragon means the great red dragon, it has seven heads and ten horns. And it fights with Michael and his envoy, catching by the angels, and be bundled for 1000 years, throwing into the abyss, this dragon is that old serpent, called the Devil, or Satan. So the expressions of dragon in English and Chinese are completely different.

The dragon in English and Chinese has completely different concepts. They are regarded as something similar just because they are a kind of virtual mythical animals in people’s their own respective cultures. In order to distinguish the dragon in the English and Chinese culture, we’d better to translate the dragon from China into “Chinese dragon” for avoiding the misunderstanding.

4.2. Bat

Bat is the only animal of real evolved mammals with the ability of flying. And excepting the patagiums, most body parts of one bat are covered with hair; its color is gray, tan, brown or black. Most bats hide somewhere in the darkness during the daytime and go out for food at night.

In Chinese, “bat” and “fú” are homophones in Chinese expression, so bats become a symbol of good fortune and healthy in China. It is considered as the auspicious animal. And bats are very common in Chinese paper cutting or traditional Chinese painting.

In English culture, most people think bats are a kind of evil animal, and they are always be associated with the wicked forces of darkness. The reason is that bats like to live in the shady and moist places. For bats in English, most of the expressions are pejorative, for examples, “be bats/ crazy as a bat” means mentally unbalanced or teched, and “as blind as a bat” means having a narrow vision. So, if we use the expression of “batty” to describe someone in English that might means the person is insane.

5. Conclusion

Words are carrying the cultural information obviously, which can reflect the human social life. The vocabularies of animals in different languages reflect the differences in cultural development. Human maintain the close contact with animals, and the existence of animals has a profound impact on the human survival and development.

Language is closely related to culture, and because of the differences of English and Chinese national cultures, living environments, experiences, different values and folklores, the animal words contain different cultural connotations in English and Chinese and those animal words bring differences on understanding.

Through the analysis of the cultural differences in English and Chinese animal words expression, we can see

clearly that the animal words in any language are not merely the symbols of animal image, and the cultural differences give deep cultural imprints to animal words. To understand the cultural connotations of animal words, we should keep on a lot of reading, make research on the cultural differences and give ourselves the in-depth understanding of different cultural traditions and customs. In the process of comparing the English and Chinese languages and cultures or the cross-cultural communications, we should pay attention to the importance of languages and cultures. Thus it can be seen that it is subject to be further explored of the cultural expressions of animal words in different languages.

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