

The Study of the Allusions and English Idioms Related to Animals

Yan Wang

Fuzhou University of International Studies and Trade
Fuzhou, China 350202

Abstract—There are many animal-related idioms, proverbs and allusions in English. They are vivid and appropriate, exquisite and humorous, which highlight the wisdom and customs of Western culture and folklore. As a result, English becomes amiable and interesting. In the process of learning English, English learners often encounter idioms related to animal nouns. However, most people tend to misinterpret their meanings when reading literary works. This paper summarizes some English idioms related to animal nouns in order to help English learners understand and grasp the meanings of English idioms correctly in the future English learning process, so as to better understand the cultural background knowledge of English-speaking countries.

Keywords—*idioms; the origin of idioms; the meaning of idioms*

I. INTRODUCTION

In Chinese, people are accustomed to using some nouns related to animals to express a special meaning, such as *paper tigers* for the strong and the dry, *poisonous snakes* for the hard-hearted, *timid as mice* for someone very timid, *cats crying for mice* for false compassion, similar uses are numerous. It is interesting to note that many animal idioms are also widely used in English idioms, such as using *pigs* to allude to people's laziness, using *wolves* to describe people's cruelty, and using *ostriches* to satirize people's self-deception. The *cock* is used to depict people's high spirit, and the *mouse* is used to whip people's dirty side. A good command of them will help English learners to have a better understanding of the cultural background of English-speaking countries. [1]

II. THE DEFINITION OF IDIOMS

An idiom is a phrase which means something different from the meanings of the separate words from which it is formed. An idiom is a fixed group of words with a special meaning which is different from the meanings of the individual words. Idioms are fixed phrases with specific meanings, which differ from the meanings of each word that forms a fixed phrase.

III. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF IDIOMS

The characteristics of idioms can be summed up in the following three aspects:

A. Idioms Are Usually Fixed

Idioms can make some minor changes, but they can't usually change their words, word order or grammatical form like non-idioms.

For example, (non-idioms) she likes cats and dogs. This sentence can be rewritten as "She likes dogs and cats." But (idioms) "it's raining cats and dogs" means it rains heavily. The sentence cannot be rewritten as "It's raining dogs and cats."

B. Idioms Have Specific Meanings

The meaning of an idiom is not a simple superposition of the meanings of its words, but has its specific meaning. Take the following idiom as an example.

"The birds and the bees" cannot be understood literally; actually it means common sense about sexual relation between males and females, which can also be made known to children. Another idiom "as blind as a bat", it can't be literally translated into "blind as a bat". Its real meaning is to express "eyes can't see anything at all".

C. Idioms Have Strong Cultural Characteristics

Idioms, as phrases or short sentences refined after a long period of use, are the core and essence of language. They are closely linked with cultural traditions and are inseparable. They carry cultural information with distinct national cultural characteristics, accumulate extremely rich national cultural semantics, and express various social relations and idioms of different nationalities, which often reflect different nationalities in geography and culture. There are many differences in history, religious beliefs, and customs and so on.

IV. THE ORIGIN OF IDIOMS

Idioms are not only related to a nation's religious culture, but also closely related to its history, cultural heritage, life experience, geographical conditions, social customs and spiritual realm. These are the main determinants of the national characteristics of idioms. Therefore, idioms can be regarded as a mirror reflecting a country or a kind of cultural characteristics.

A. Idioms Come from the Daily Life of Working People

The working people have created many idioms in their work and life. For example, sailors have invented many vivid phrases related to the sea; athletes use sports idioms. These idioms come from all walks of life. They are not only concise and oral, but also vivid and closely related to life. So they are widely used in similar situations in daily life. The most vivid and useful idioms gradually evolve from universal dialogue to conventional language, and eventually they are widely used.

B. Idioms Derive from Ancient Myths, Legends and Fables

Ancient Greek and Roman civilization had a far-reaching impact on English. Many English idioms originated from ancient Greek myths and legends and were widely used in written language. For example, *the apple of discord* (similar to the seeds of discord) refers to disputes, disasters; *Pandora's Box* refers to the box that brings disaster to mankind and holds all the evils. Another example, the phrase "Grapes are sour if you can't eat them" comes from Aesop's Fable. A hungry fox wanted to eat the ripe grapes on the vineyard, and he tried every means to pick them, but he couldn't reach them. In the end, he walked away and comforted himself by saying, "These grapes are sour, maybe not ripe yet."

C. Idioms Come from Religion

People living in feudal society were deeply influenced by religion, and there are still many idioms reflecting religious beliefs at that time. There are also a lot of idioms in the Bible. In fact, many Biblical phrases still appear in oral dialogue, but it is difficult to trace their origins. For example, olive branch originated from the Bible, and its real meaning is "peace". Genesis of the Old Testament says, "God sent floods to extinguish the world, and the righteous Noahs were safe and sound by the ark. When the flood receded, Noah released pigeons to test the water potential. When the pigeons returned to the ark, they held an olive leaf in their mouth. Noah judged that the flood had subsided. [3] Later, people regarded olive branch as a symbol of peace and peace. Now the idiom "hand out the olive branch" has been widely used by Chinese readers.

D. Idioms Come from Classical Literary Works

After the Bible, Shakespeare's plays became the richest source of English idioms, which were widely used. For example, *Achilles' heel* is used to describe the most fatal weakness. The connotation of this idiom comes from the famous Greek epic *Iliad*.

V. CLASSIFICATION OF IDIOMS

Idioms can be classified into many categories, including those categorized according to the scope of metaphor, those categorized according to the individual of metaphor, those categorized according to the subject, and those categorized according to the key words. [2] This paper mainly discusses idioms categorized by metaphorical individuals.

The following is a brief introduction to idioms related to common animals.

A. Idioms Related to Animal "Bird"

The idiom *A little bird* means a well-informed person. The Bible is a concentrated reflection of the history, society and culture of the Western world. Some of the languages in the Bible have penetrated into the daily English language. Understanding these languages will help us communicate with westerners better and help us understand English and American literary works better. Use specific animals in the Bible, such as:

From: The Book of Ecclesiastes [4]

Do not curse the king, even in your thoughts; do not curse the rich, even in your bedroom; for a bird of the air may carry your voice, and a bird in flight may tell the matter.

This metaphor refers to "the news that someone has told me in private is going all the way."

Example: —How do you know this information?

— *A little bird told me.*

Other examples related to "birds" are as follows:

An early bird means people getting up early; *Kill two birds with one stone* means achieve two things at one stroke; *double gain*; shoot two hawks with one arrow; succeed in doing two things by only one action; *Birds of a feather flock together* means people or things of one kind always come together; *A bird in the hand is worth than two in the bush*; *Each bird love to hear himself sing* means indulge in self-admiration

B. Idioms Related to Animal "Cat"

Let the cat out of the bag means (unintentionally) divulge secrets; *There isn't enough room to swing a cat* means the place is narrow; there is not enough room for study or work; *A cat has 9 lives* means vitality is extremely tenacious; *A cat may look at a king* means all men are equal.

C. Idioms Related to Animal "Horse"

Back the wrong horse means misreading people; *Put the cart before the horse* means place the unimportant before the important, having the order reversed; *A dark horse* means a person who has the ability, but to hide his ability; *Can eat a horse* means eating a lot; *A one horse race* means a game that is not intense or has a definite victory or defeat; *Get on one's high horse* means hold one's head high or carry an arrogant air.

D. Idioms Related to Animal "Ants"

Ants in one's pants, if only literally, the phrase refers to "ants in pants". How did the ants climb into their pants? What would it feel like to have ants in their pants? Everyone is still puzzled. The specific origin of this phrase cannot be verified, but there is a reasonable and convincing statement. It is said that long ago when explorers went to the wilderness mountains to explore, in order to prevent the attack of beasts,

they did a variety of preparations. They take their own defensive weapons in case of accident. But they never expected that the beasts did not threaten them very much, because they were afraid of these unexpected visitors, and they had run away for a long time. It was the insects and ants in the grass that got into their trousers feet without scruple and crawled around them. As a result, the explorers were restless and at a loss. Gradually, ants in one's pants form a fixed phrase, which is more interesting than "fidgeting" or "anxious like ants on a hot pot" in Chinese. For example: Tom has got a ticket to the football match, but his father ordered him to write the composition at home. He has ants in his pants.

VI. CONCLUSION

To sum up, idioms are indispensable and expressive in language. They have their own characteristics and cannot be replaced by other forms of language. Every English idiom has its allusions, background and specific cultural connotations in its formation process. For English learners, it is necessary to understand the allusions behind the idioms so that they can truly understand the meaning of the idioms and remember them more deeply. It is hoped that the learners will develop such a habit of exploring the origin of knowledge when they encounter the idioms in the future.

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