A Comparative Study of Different Cultural Connotations of the Word "Rat" in Chinese and English Online Language

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Abstract. Rat is a kind of animal that is familiar among humans, but due to the behaviors of stealing food and spreading disease, the cultural connotation and animal metaphors have become negative in almost traditional cultures. In the metaphor area, here are many comparative studies about animal metaphors of different animals in Chinese and English. Recently, new animal metaphors about "rat" in online language are also widely used, but there were scant studies about the new online animal metaphors. Moreover, there is no study that only focuses on animal metaphors about "rat," which is a research gap. This comparative study focuses on the difficulties for foreigners to acquire new online animal metaphors about "rat" and their cultural connotations in Chinese and English, along with the differences between traditional animal metaphors and new online ones. To find out the results, two new animal metaphors "Shu Ren" and "Jie Dui Zi" in Chinese and two new ones "Internet rat" and "RAT" in English are investigated. During the analysis, the origins and cultural connotations of these new online animal metaphors are found respectively and compared. The results show that new animal metaphors can be used as self-mockery instead of only describing others, and they appear due to the recent social phenomena. Moreover, the four factors of the difficulties for foreigners to acquire new online animal metaphors and their cultural connotations are society, politics, convention and language. Furthermore, this study can contribute to the area of metaphor for arising people's awareness of metaphor knowledge in animals, especially rats.

Keywords: Comparative study, Online Animal Metaphor, Cultural connotation

1   Introduction

Rat, or mouse, is a kind of animal which frequently appears in front of humans. Due to the behavior of stealing food and spreading disease, the cultural connotation of rats becomes negative in almost all traditional cultures, and animal metaphors of "rat" appear in the languages of the corresponding cultures. In Chinese and English, the cultural connotation of "rat" is similar, and the animal metaphor of it are also identical in both

form and meaning [1]. Therefore, the animal metaphors of "rat" are relatively easy for Chinese and English users to understand and acquire.

Recently, animal metaphors in online language are also widely used by netizens, and most of them can learn these metaphors when reading or sharing comments on the Internet. However, with different historical background and societal development, animal metaphors about "rat" in Chinese and English online language are different, and they are also different from traditional animal metaphors in many aspects. This situation makes the animal metaphors in online language more difficult for Chinese and English users to acquire each other.

There are many comparative studies focusing on the comparison of animal metaphors and cultural connotations of animal words in Chinese and English. For example, Li and Liu compare the cultural connotations of Chinese and English animal words to analyze the reasons for these differences and the different methods to translate these words [2]. Li focuses on the comparison of the cultural connotations of animal words in Chinese and English by listing a number of examples and the main factors influencing the differences [3]. Moreover, this comparative study is based on the perspective of intercultural communication between Chinese and English cultures. Another comparative study of the difference between English and Chinese animal proverbs is conducted by Liu. In this study, different animal proverbs in English and Chinese and their metaphorical forms and meanings are compared and analyzed [1]. However, this study stands in the perspective of metaphor per se and different major views of metaphor are listed. Finally, Fu conducts a comparative study about the conceptual motivation of the animal proverbs in Chinese and English [4]. However, this is a very detailed comparison in metaphorical, cognitive and cross-cultural perspectives.

There are also some studies focusing on other perspectives or theories. Song analyzes the differences of animal metaphors in Chinese and English in a cognitive perspective and is based on the theory of anthropocentrism [5]. Xu and Sharifian conducted a semi-structured interview and analyzed the 12 zodiac animal words in Chinese and how it is used in English [6]. Waru et al. also analyze the cultural connotations of different zodiac animals respectively and the idioms involving them which do not exist in English [7]. However, these two studies provide a good example of the idioms and cultural connotations of "rat" in Chinese.

2   Research questions

Based on the topic of this study, however, there are some factors being missed by these studies mentioned. First, none of these studies focused on only one animal word and the corresponding cultural connotation in Chinese and English. Second, all these studies compare only traditional animal metaphors instead of online language. Third, none of these studies analyze the reasons for the difficulties for Chinese and English language learners to understand the animal metaphors in the online language of the other language.

Therefore, the goal of this study is to find out the difficulties for foreign language learners to understand and acquire animal metaphors in online language by comparing

the origin of some recent animal metaphors in Chinese and English online language. To achieve this goal, two research questions are asked:

What is the difference between traditional animal metaphors and those in online language?

Why do Chinese and English language learners feel difficult to understand animal metaphors in online language of the other language?

3   Cultural connotations of animal metaphors in online language

3.1   Cultural Connotations of Animal Metaphors in Chinese Online Language

Recently there are two frequently used animal metaphors in the Chinese online language:

The first one is "*Shu Ren*" which literally means "rat man." This originates from a newly created and widely used sentence "I am a rat living in the sewer, and I want to look up the sky." In this sentence, "sewer" refers to the dirty places without any brightness, and "sky" refers to a nice future. Therefore, this sentence is created by the people of the underclass in China as a self-mockery to describe their disgusting living environment and hopeless life in poverty. As for "rat," it can ascribe to the cultural connotation based on basic situations in China. As living in a country with the great development of agriculture, Chinese people suffered from pestis and the crops were harmed by rats in ancient times. Even in modern times, rats still steal food from homes or farms. Although Chinese people figure out a number of methods for rodents control, their hatred for rats is ineradicable. Therefore, in Chinese culture, rats are frequently described as the symbol of dirtiness [7]. From the perspective of metaphor, rats are usually personified as timid people [1]. Based on these, "rat man" is also a kind of black humor which shows the reality that some people in China are now in a poor life and they can do nothing to change their current situation even though they have tried their best for their dreamed life, and gradually lose the confidence of better life. This is the reason for the appearance of the new online expression "*Shu Ren*" in Chinese.

The second one appears in a riddle "to get married in the Year of Rat". The answer to the riddle is "*Jie Dui Zi*" which literally means "to pair up." This is originally the alias of a poverty elimination policy named "pair-up assistance" in China. It urges the local officials to tie up with one poor family to pay the tuition and provide other kinds of economic assistance for the children of this family. As time goes by, the word "*Jie Dui Zi*" is gradually used to describe any kind of one-to-one assistance. For example, academic assistance between two students and commercial help between two companies can both be called "*Jie Dui Zi*". However, the relationship between this new online word and the riddle "to get married in the Year of Rat" is very complicated as it is connected with the Chinese language and zodiac culture. "*Jie Dui Zi*" is combined with two words "*Jie Dui*" and "*Zi*." "*Jie Dui*" means "to pair up" or "to make a couple," which is close to the meaning of "to get married" in Chinese. "*Zi*" in this online word

is a meaningless Chinese character and only plays the role of making the pronunciation smoother. However, in the system of describing Chinese lunar years by 12 zodiac animals, "*Zi*" is used to stand for the first year of the 12-year lunar cycle, and the corresponding one of "*Zi*" is rat which is the first one of the 12 zodiac animals [6]. Therefore, based on the online word "*Jie Dui Zi,*" the riddle "to get married in the Year of Rat" is created and widely used by Chinese netizens.

3.2   Cultural Connotations of Animal Metaphors in English Online Language

In recent years there are also two hot online words in English:

The first one is "Internet rat." It is a slang being widely used on the Internet. An Internet rat is to describe persons using the Internet dating sites to disguise their true identity, especially their marriage, or those who tells tall tales to obtain sex under the guise of a monogamous relationship. According to the explanations of "rat" in English dictionaries, the rat is used to describe something suspicious or somebody untrustworthy, which also shows a negative cultural connotation. Due to the behavior of stealing food, rats are originally personified as thieves in English, and then they become the symbol of slyness [2]. However, "Internet rat" originates from a series of events called "Internet Love Rats." Many people, especially women, were deceived by the false identities and images about so-called singles on dating sites or applications and were swindled or even forced to have sexual behaviors. Based on these, "Internet rat" is widely used on the Internet.

The second new online word frequently appearing is "RAT". This is an acronym for "Rapid Antigen Test" which can also be called "RAT test." Although this has existed as a professional medical vocabulary for a very long time, the word "RAT" has become widely used on the Internet after the global spread of Covid-19. Therefore, in the perspective of the lexicon, RAT has nothing to do with rats neither literally nor metaphorically. However, in the perspective of phonetics, RAT can be pronounced as "rat" so that people hear the pronunciation of the word "rat." Moreover, when hearing RAT or some other medical vocabulary, people possibly imagine the scene of using the rats in medical experiments. When being tested, people tend to be nervous and imagine that they are the same as the rats being tested during experiments. RAT, therefore, is connected with the rats.

4   Comparisons of animal metaphors in Chinese and English online language

4.1   Comparisons of traditional animal metaphors and those in online language

Among those traditional animal metaphors about rats in Chinese, none of them are used for self-mockery. For example, there is a frequently used expression "*Dan Xiao Ru Shu*" which literally means "as timid as a rat" [3]. This is of a derogatory sense and

used to describe a very timid person. Thus it is not used for self-description no matter how timid a person is. Another example is "*Guo Jie Lao Shu*" which literally means "the rat being crossing the street." This is also a derogatory expression to describe the notorious persons who are looked down upon and hated by everyone. Therefore, different from these traditional animal metaphors, black humor is applied in animal metaphors about rat in Chinese online language such as "*Shu Ren*," and these new expressions are used for self-mockery more.

Another characteristic of these new animal metaphors in the online language is that they all connect with recent events, policies or social phenomena. For example, "*Shu Ren*" is created by Chinese netizens, especially the younger ones because most contemporary young Chinese are facing many social problems and they are under high pressure. "*Jie Dui Zi*" originates from a recent poverty elimination policy and is gradually used more widely for other aspects of life in China. As for those in English, "Internet rat" is created based on a series of events with severe consequences and is widely used by netizens to show their attitudes and high attention to these events. Although RAT has existed for many years, it has become well-known due to the global epidemics, and is thus widely used on the Internet. Therefore, this is the most distinguishable characteristic of these animal metaphors in online language.

4.2   Factors of Difficulties to Acquire Animal Metaphors in Online Language

According to the introduction of the cultural connotations of the four new animal metaphors in online language, four kinds of factors influencing the difficulty of acquiring animal metaphors in online language can be found.

First, the factors of society. "*Shu Ren*" and "Internet rat" are good examples. "*Shu Ren*" is frequently used by Chinese young people to describe their poor and hard life. Recently in China, young people are facing many social problems. For example, the rising housing prices [8], increasing difficulties of getting employed, the aging population [9]. To solve these problems they are facing, they have to study hard to get a higher degree so that they can get more opportunities to get better jobs. After that, they have to work hard to obtain a higher salary for a brighter future. However, this is a very long and difficult process for most young Chinese, most of whom find it hopeless. Therefore, they create "*Shu Ren*" as a self-mockery to describe their hard and hopeless life as employees, which they are content with and they do not hope to strive for a brighter future anymore even though they tried their best. Therefore, for foreigners who know nothing about the current situation of young Chinese, it is difficult for them to understand the origin and the cultural connotation of "*Shu Ren*" even though it can be translated as "rat man" literally. Similarly, "Internet rat" is also frequently used by English users on the Internet. This new animal metaphor originates from the informal expression "love rat" which means "a man who has had a secret relationship with someone he is not married to or who is not his regular sexual partner" according to the Cambridge dictionary [10]. However, this word is informal and usually used in newspapers. However, due to the social problems caused by "Internet Love Rat" which victimizes many gullible young people, "love rat" appears more frequently. Moreover, because these

"love rats" disguise their identity on the Internet and deceive those young people into having sexual relations with them, which cause extremely serious consequences, "Internet rat" is created and used as a criticism of this series of social events and these "love rats." However, for English learners who know nothing about these social events, it is difficult for them to connect "Internet rat" to "love rat" even though they know what a "love rat" is, thus difficult to understand the cultural connotation of "Internet rat".

Second, the factors of politics. New words are often created when new political events occur or new policies are established, and the appearance of "*Jie Dui Zi*" is a very good example of this perspective. This word first appeared in 2008 after the seventeenth CPC National Congress and the Third Plenary Session of the Seventeenth Central Committee [11]. It is a poverty elimination policy that involves assistance in many aspects. This policy, for example, it urges that local officials should provide poor families with assistance about finance, agricultural projects and skills and opportunities for employment. Besides, local advanced families are also urged to provide financial assistance for the children in poor families so that they can afford the tuition fee. [12] This connection is called "*Jie Dui Zi*" which means "pair-up assistance." As time goes by, it is widely used to indicate any other kind of one-to-one assistance. For example, the academic assistance for students by teachers or other more excellent students can be called "*Jie Dui Zi*," and so can the assistance with practical skills for employees by other elder and experienced ones in workplaces. Therefore, "*Jie Dui Zi*" has become a frequently used word on the Internet. For foreigners who know nothing about this kind of policy and the current situation of poverty elimination in China, it is very difficult to find out the origin of "*Jie Dui Zi*" and thus impossible to understand its cultural connotation of it.

Third, the factors of the convention. Besides the origin of "*Jie Dui Zi*" per se, the convention of Chinese zodiac years also plays a very important role in the origin of the riddle connecting with "*Jie Dui Zi*." In ancient era in China, people began to record years based on the 12 zodiac animals. Every zodiac animal corresponds with one terrestrial branch, which is somewhat similar the 12 signs of the zodiac in Western countries [13]. Therefore, For example, 2020 is the Year of Rat according to Chinese zodiac culture, and it is also called "*Zi Nian*" ("the Year of *Zi*") since the corresponding terrestrial branch of rat is "*Zi*." Therefore, the convention of Chinese zodiac years is the most important reason that "the Year of Rat" in the riddle can be connected with the Chinese character "*Zi*". And based on the similar meanings of "to get married" and "*Jie Dui*," the riddle "to get married in the Year of Rat" is created and the answer "*Jie Dui Zi*" is reasonably connected. However, although Chinese zodiac culture is similar to the Western zodiac in some aspects, it is still difficult for foreigners to understand Chinese zodiac culture as it is not only 12 animals. Without knowing this important convention in China, it is very difficult for foreigners to understand this riddle and, consequently, its cultural connotation.

Finally, the factors of the language. As it is mentioned, the recent widely used word "RAT" is the acronym for "rapid antigen test." Acronym is a kind of word formed from the initial letters of successive words [14]. However, although acronym exists in many languages, the acronyms for "rapid antigen test" in other languages are possibly

different from that in English. Moreover, in English, "RAT" can stand for another different thing, such as "remote administration tool" in computing, or "radio access technology." Therefore, for those who have never seen "RAT" as a medical vocabulary or know nothing about how to express "rapid antigen test" in English, it is impossible to connect this with rat, and thus difficult to acquire the cultural connotation.

5   Conclusion

By analyzing and comparing the origins of the two new online animal metaphors about "rat" in Chinese and two in English and the reasons to be used widely on the Internet, the differences between traditional animal metaphors and new online ones and different factors that influence the difficulties for Chinese and English learners to acquire these new animal metaphors and their connotations are found.

The differences between traditional animal metaphors about "rat" and new online ones are shown from two perspectives. First, as a long-time used derogatory image, new online animal metaphors about "rat" begin to perform as self-mockery instead to describe others. Second, all online animal metaphors mentioned are created and widely used by netizens based on current social phenomena, including social events, policies and current social situations.

In terms of different cultures, there are four main factors that make the online animal metaphors about "rat" difficult for foreign language learners to acquire. First, different social situations and events influence the origin and use of the new online animal metaphors and thus make the cultural connotation difficult for foreigners to acquire. Second, the new animal metaphors about "rat" can originate from recent policies which may be strange for foreigners. Third, the creation of new animal metaphors can also be based on conventions of a culture, and the cultural connotations are difficult if the foreigners know little or nothing about the conventions. Finally, language per se also plays a very important role in creating new online animal metaphors, and the differences between languages make the new animal metaphors and their cultural connotations difficult for foreigners.

This comparative research investigates the difference between traditional animal metaphors and new online ones, providing a perspective to analyze the reasons for difficulties for foreigners to understand and acquire animal metaphors and their cultural connotations in different languages. Moreover, different factors that influence the difficulty to learn online animal metaphors are analyzed, which are also good resources for foreigners to deeply understand animal metaphors and corresponding cultural connotations. More importantly, this research only focuses on animal metaphors about "rat" and thus providing a method to deeply understand the cultural connotation of "rat" in Chinese and English.

There are, however, some limitations in this research. First, the number of new online animal metaphors are not enough to conduct a deeper analysis of animal metaphors and cultural connotations as the contexts are relatively limited. Second, although this research focuses on animal metaphors about "rat," only those in Chinese and English are compared, making the cultures about "rat" can be based on limited. Therefore,

in the future, more online animal metaphors about "rat" in a different language can also be analyzed and compared so that more contexts and different cultures can be involved.

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