



Metaphors of Animal Words in English and Chinese and the Inspiration of Foreign Language Teaching

Li Zhao[✉]

School of Foreign Languages, Dalian Jiaotong University, DaLian 116000, Liaoning, China
3521051@qq.com

Abstract. Animal vocabulary contains a metaphorical way of thinking, which regards animals as the source domain and people or things as the target domain and implement a cross domain projection. The differences between English and Chinese language users in terms of geographical environment, living habits, ways of thinking, religious beliefs and other aspects lead to some differences in the metaphorical use of animal words. Understanding and mastering these differences will promote cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: metaphor · animal words · cross-cultural communication

1 Introduction

Metaphor is not only a rhetoric way of language, but also a cognitive way in which human think about the world. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) think the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another [1]. Metaphor in cognitive science is a deep cognitive means for human beings to understand the objective world. By projecting the shape and characteristics of the source domain to the target domain with similar features but different conceptual categories, it helps people to establish a connection between two different things in the thinking organization [2].

2 Animal Metaphors in Chinese and English Culture

Animals and human beings are main creatures living together on the earth. The remote ancestors of human beings were members of the animal kingdom. During the long evolution of human beings, animals have been regarded as the closest friends of human beings and an indispensable part in human's life and the use of animal words must leave traces in human society and culture. In fact, animal metaphor usually maps animals' features to human beings to express new meanings. Metaphorical mapping is not created casually, but rooted in people's life experience in the process of practice for a long time, reflecting their respective cultural characteristics and cognitive tendencies [3]. Due to the different world experiences and cognitive tendencies of human beings, there are many corresponding or non-corresponding metaphorical expressions in English and Chinese [4].

© The Author(s) 2023

R. B. B. M. Hussain et al. (Eds.): ICHSSR 2023, ASSEHR 765, pp. 115–119, 2023.

https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-092-3_17

2.1 Same Images and Same Metaphorical Meanings

Living on the same planet, Chinese and occidentals have many similarities in the life experiences, so there are many things in common in their understanding of nature. Therefore, in some cases, English and Chinese will use the same animal to express the same metaphorical meaning.

In both the West and China, wolf is considered to be a ferocious animal. Therefore, words related to wolves are mostly used to describe wicked people or the bad side of human nature [5]. In Chinese, a person greedy and cruel and full of wild ambitions is called as “a wolf with a savage heart”. “Two wolves” refer to two persons banded together to commit a crime. Both in Chinese and English, “a wolf in sheep’s clothing” refers to a villain disguised as a good man. There is an English idiom, “a wolf may lose his teeth, but never his nature”, meaning it’s hard to change a person’s nature.

Mice are not popular in both cultures because they live in dark caves and steal human’s food. Words related to rats often have derogatory meanings, such as “as cowardly as a rat” and “like a drowned rat”. In Chinese, “a rat crossing the street” refers to a person or a thing that provokes wrath of the masses [6].

2.2 Same Images and Different Metaphorical Meanings

Although some English and Chinese words have some similarities in usage, the conceptual features mapped by the same animal may be completely different, due to differences in geographical environment, cultural background and religious belief, etc..

The image of a dog is mostly derogatory in Chinese. For instance, “a running dog” means a person who is under the control of another person or group. “A dog in the water” means a bad person who has lost favour or power. “A dog bites with the strength of his master” means a bully under the protection of a powerful person. However, in English culture, a dog is regarded as a human family member, often favored and loved because of its loyalty. English speakers may say “Every dog has his day.” when they want to tell others every ordinary person may have an opportunity to be successful. They will also say “Love me, love my dog.” to remind you if you like someone, you should accept everything about him or her, including the faults. “A lucky dog” refers to a lucky person and “a top dog” refers to a winner [7–9].

2.3 Different Images and Same Metaphorical Meanings

In China, a tiger has been regarded as the king of beasts, partly because that the forehead of a tiger has a pattern similar to the Chinese character “king”, symbolizing power and courage. We can see people’s fear of tigers from the idiom “turning pale when talking about tigers”. Ancient Chinese complained heavy taxes and harsh laws with the idiom “the tyranny is fiercer than the tiger”. In West, people believe that the lion is the king of all animals. Therefore, the image of a lion in the eyes of western people is just like that of a tiger in the eyes of Chinese people [6]. For example, “like a donkey in the lion” in English corresponds to “a fox pretends to be a tiger” in Chinese, and “don’t beard the lion” corresponds to “a tiger’s butt can’t be touched”. English speakers say “a lion in the way”, while Chinese say “a tiger in the way”. For another example, in Chinese, “like

ants on hot pot” is often used to describe anxiety and restless mood, while English uses “like a cat on hot bricks” to express the same metaphor.

3 Factors Influencing the Metaphorical Meaning of Animal Words

3.1 Natural Environment and Social Environment

Animals growing in different geographical environments have different characteristics, leading to people’s different feelings towards animals. China is a large agricultural country and cattle are important tools for farming. Due to the heavy farming tasks, cattle embody the image of working hard. When people say somebody is diligent and hardworking, they may use the metaphor “to bow down as a willing ox”. Western civilization originates from marine civilization, therefore, most of the metaphorical words with regional characteristics in West revolve around oceans, water, islands, etc.. There are many phrases about “fish” in English. “Big fish” refers to tycoons. “To drink like a fish” means people got drunk. “A loose fish” means people who live a dissolute life.

3.2 Religious Beliefs and Legends

Religious beliefs, myths and legends also have an important influence on the metaphorical meanings of animal words. Dragon, an animal in ancient Chinese mythology, is one of the symbols of the Chinese nation. It is said that dragons can fly, change, control wind and rain. Dragons are juxtaposed with phoenix and unicorn as auspicious omens. In ancient times, they mainly implied imperial power [6]. “The spirit of horse and dragon” usually is used to praise the vigorous spirit of a person. “Prosperity brought by the dragon and the phoenix” refers to extremely good fortune. “Dragons rise and tigers leap” means a scene of bustling activity.

In English legends or religious belief, there is no such a symbol of dragons. Westerners believe in Christianity. Snakes in the Bible entice Adam and Eve to eat forbidden fruit, so snakes are evil images in western culture. “A snake in the grass” means a bad person pretending to be a friend, and “to warm a snake in one’s bosom” means to shield a bad person.

3.3 Homophones

The differences in pronunciation systems also lead to different animal metaphors. In Chinese, “fish” is pronounced as “yu”, which is a homophone of a Chinese word meaning surplus wealth. There is a traditional custom in China that New Year pictures with the pattern of “fish” will be pasted on the Spring Festival, embodying people’s hope for a prosperous life in the new year.

Another example is “sheep”. “Sheep” is pronounced as “yang”, which is quite similar to the pronunciation of “Xiang”, meaning auspiciousness. In ancient times, all the happiness that Chinese people aspire to revolves around auspiciousness. People are willing to find some specific sustenance for this kind of good wish, so they choose “sheep”. “Three rams bringing bliss” is one popular auspicious design among Chinese people.

4 Inspiration of Animal Metaphors to Foreign Language Teaching

Metaphor is the window of culture. From the differences of metaphors, we can see the uniqueness of culture in different countries. Without certain cognitive competence of metaphor, speakers and listeners of different languages cannot understand each other well, or even have a reverse understanding of metaphor, which leads to communication confusion. Integrating conceptual metaphor into foreign language teaching can help foreign language learners understand the thinking mode and culture of the target language users, so that the success of cross-cultural communication may be promoted.

4.1 Strengthen the Teaching of Cultural Connotation of Metaphorical Vocabulary

Metaphor can not be produced without the corresponding vocabulary. In foreign language teaching, teachers should not only introduce the basic meaning of vocabulary, but also draw students' attention to the metaphorical connotation of vocabulary, analyzing the cultural roots that contribute to this metaphorical connotation.

4.2 Cultivate Metaphorical Competence in Foreign Language

It is essential to cultivate foreign language learners' metaphorical competence. The language output style of foreign language learners is often too formal, single, or even lengthy and vague due to the lack of metaphorical language. For English learners in China, on the one hand, due to the lack of awareness of the use of metaphorical language, students are often unable to convert common metaphors in English into proper words or expressions in their output. On the other hand, there is a widespread problem of translating Chinese metaphors directly into English, causing difficulties or even mistakes in understanding for English users. Therefore, English teachers should cultivate students' metaphorical thinking, and at the same time, pay attention to avoiding errors in the use of metaphors caused by the transfer of mother tongue.

5 Conclusion

Animal metaphors, which contain many special cultural images, are important expressions both in Chinese and English languages and culture. Metaphor theory provides a new dimension and inspiration for foreign language teaching from the perspective of cognitive semantics. It can enable students to sense the unique meaning of some expression in foreign language and the cultural connotation behind language phenomena. What's more, students may experience the fun of learning foreign languages [10]. Therefore, foreign language teachers should attach importance to the metaphor teaching, so as to enhance students' awareness of cross-cultural communication and cultivate more high-quality talents with cross-cultural communication ability.

References

1. G. Lakoff, M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, The University of Chicago Press, 1980.
2. C. Lan, *Cognitive Linguistics and Metaphor Studies*, Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2005.
3. L.C. Su, *English and Chinese Conceptual Metaphor and Foreign Language Teaching*, Nan Kai University Press, 2016.
4. D.F. Su, *Metaphor and Metonymy*, Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2011.
5. Q.L. Zhou, W.H. Qi, A study on animal metaphors in Chinese and English idioms, *English Teachers* 20(16)(2020) 182-184.
6. X.D. Chang, Comparative analysis of English and Chinese animal metaphor, *Discipline Education* 12(2018) 162-163.
7. X.R. Qiao, A contrast study on animal metaphors in English and Chinese idioms, *Read and Write Periodical* 14(12)(2017) 6-8.
8. H.Y. Zhu, The enlightenment on English culture teaching with examples of animal metaphors in English and Chinese, *The Science Education Article Collects* 432(8)(2018) 172-174.
9. S. Ma, Comparative study of idioms of dog in Chinese and Japanese from the perspective of metaphor, *Masterpieces Review* 7(2021) 175-177.
10. H.M. Wang, A study of English reading teaching based on conceptual metaphor, *Journal of Xinxiang University* 38(7) (2021) 70-73.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

