

Cultural Implications Reflected by Animal Metaphors in Proverbs of English, Chinese, and German

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Proverbs are summaries of people's life experiences with profound philosophies, among which animal proverbs are universally and frequently used in various languages. This paper analyzes the similarities and differences in the meanings of several representative animal metaphors in the proverbs of English, Chinese, and German, and discusses the potential reasons of their formation and the cultures involved. This paper provides learners with examples of understanding culture-loaded animal proverbs.

Keywords: proverbs, animal metaphor, comparative study, culture

Introduction

Proverbs are short, easy-to-remember phrases that contain pragmatic life experiences and ways of dealing with the world. In cross-cultural communication, the concept of seeking convergence while preserving differences has become increasingly popular, and reciprocal understanding is essential if countries are to better exchange and trade with each other (Kong, 2021, p. 351). As a microcosm of culture, each country has its own characteristics in terms of proverbial expressions. There are both similarities and differences in the cultural connotations embodied by these proverbs. This essay analyzes and compares the cultural differences among English, Chinese, and German by examining the meanings of the identical animal in the proverbs of the three countries, which will contribute to cultural understanding and communication.

Implications of Animal Metaphors in Proverbs

In the animal proverbs of English, Chinese, and German societies influenced by religious or cultural backgrounds, the same animals may represent different meanings, and some may even have completely opposite implications. Meanwhile as people have similar views and feelings about the objective world, there are also cases where the same animal metaphors will produce similar associations. Both of these cases are illustrated with examples in this paper. As metaphors of the cow, sheep, fish, and donkey are the most commonly used images in animal proverbs, they will be used as examples in the following discussion.

Table1 lists some proverbs with the metaphor of cow (bull, ox, or calf) in Chinese and German. In China, the cattle is an important partner in farming, so in Chinese they are often compared to conscientious and diligent

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people, and they embody positive meanings in most cases. In both German and English, the bull is a emblem of wealth and power. This symbolism has its genesis in the Bible. It is recorded that after leaving Egypt, the Israeli, having not yet escaped the customs they had been taught in Egypt, made a golden calf out of gold and worshipped it as an image of God. However, a new version of cow in German has been extended, “Der Ochse”, the castrated cow, which is often used in colloquial German to mean a stupid, obtuse person, as indicated in the proverbs.

Table 1

Proverbs With Cow/Bull/Ox/Calf

Language	Example	Explanation
Chinese	俯首甘为孺子牛。	Bend your head to be a child's cow.
	牛市农家宝，有勤无牛白起早。	A cow is a farming treasure, no cattle only by hard work, get up early for nothing.
English	You cannot sell the cow and sup the milk.	
	An ox is taken by the horns, and the man by the tongue.	
German	Den Stier bei den Hörnern packen/fassen.	Doing something courageously.
	Die Ochsen kälbern ihm/Dem kalbt der Ochse.	Even castrated cows have calf; means someone has good luck.

As sheep are one of the domestic livestock, they are a guarantee of quality of life for a family, and as such they are often a symbol of wealth and prosperity in China. Most Chinese proverbs related to sheep are about the way of nurturing them. In the English culture the two symbols of sheep and goat are the opposite of each other. The sheep resembles the image in Chinese proverbs and has a positive connotation, whereas the goat is often used as a representation of the evil in English proverbs. Due to the similar religious background, sheep in German have similar meanings as those in English (see Table 2).

Table 2

Proverbs With Sheep/Goat

Language	Example	Explanation
Chinese	枯叶黄，不放羊。	Don't herd sheep when leaves turn yellow.
	羊子养羊子，三年一房子。	Sheep breed sheep, three years a house.
English	Get one's goat.	To provoke someone or to annoy or upset someone.
	The sheep and the goats.	Good person and bad person.
German	Einen Bock haben.	Someone is very stubborn.
	Einen Bock schießen/machen.	Making a childish and ridiculous mistake.

Table 3

Proverbs With Fish

Language	Example	Explanation
Chinese	姜太公钓鱼，愿者上钩。	Jiang Taigong fishing, those who are willing to hook.
	水至清则无鱼。	When water is clear, there are no fish.
English	A poor fish/new fish/a strange fish.	
	Neither fish nor fowl.	Incomprehensible person.
German	Das sind nur kleine Fische.	They are just small fry.
	Die großen Fische fressen die kleinen.	The strong overwhelm the weak.

Table 3 provides examples of proverbs with the metaphor of fish. In ancient China, where people dwelt by water, fish became an important source of food and a symbol of birth, thus beginning the culture of fishing. In

ancient times, the fish was a symbol of fertility because of its ability to reproduce, so it was often utilized as a symbol of human beings in Chinese proverbs as indicated. The meaning of fish in German and English proverbs is surprisingly the same as those in Chinese, both of them representing people.

Table 4 shows some examples of proverbs in the three languages that use the donkey as a metaphor. According to historical documentation, the donkey appeared in the Xiongnu. With the establishment of the Silk Road in the Han Dynasty, the donkey became more visible as a means of transport in historical documents. Despite the donkey's hard work as a means of transporting goods, it was always associated with stupidity due to its plain appearance, so most of the expressions associated with the donkey in Chinese proverbs are derogatory.

In the West, the donkey also appears in the Bible in connection with the gods. The term "donkey of Balaam" has a specific cultural meaning in Western culture, referring to those who are normally silent and tame, but now suddenly start protesting. Nevertheless, this did not change its folly, and later in the West the symbol of the donkey was considerably similar to that of the Chinese.

Table 4

Proverbs With Ass/Donkey

Language	Example	Explanation
Chinese	磨道里的驴子，走不出圈套。	The donkey in the mill can't get out of the trap.
	卸磨杀驴，忘恩负义。	Get rid of somebody as soon as he has done his job.
English	The ass wags his ears.	Fools pretending to be clever.
	If a donkey brays at you, don't bray at him.	Don't talk to stupid people.
German	Störrisch wie ein Esel sein.	Someone is very stubborn.
	Ein Esel schimpft den anderen langohr.	Blaming others for being stupid instead of blaming yourself for being stupid.

Cultural Differences Among China, Britain, and Germany

The diverse animal figures in the above proverbs do not materialise in a vacuum, but have their cultural origins and roots.

Religious Beliefs

Religious beliefs, as an important element of culture, have an important impact on people's spiritual life and daily life, and are also embodied in language (Li, 2015, p. 2). In China, the ox is an animal that is believed and worshipped by the Zhuang folk, because they are a farming ethnic group that has been farming mainly rice for generations. The ox is an essential farming animal. Every year, on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month, the Ox Soul Festival is held to pray for a good agricultural harvest and a prosperous life. As a result, all Chinese proverbs about the ox are related to agriculture. In Western culture, although the ox is portrayed in a positive light, it is often a symbol of wealth.

"Old goat" means an old lecher. "Einen Bock haben" refers to a stubborn person. This vulgar and negative image is also mirrored in religion. Both England and Germany are Christian countries. And in Christianity, the Bible often compares good individuals to sheep and bad individuals to goats. Because male goats are very lustful when they are in estrus, they are seen as a symbol of lust, which in Christianity is something that deviates from the way of the Lord and is an unforgivable sin. For this reason, in English, the goat is a symbol of cupidity.

In Chinese history, the sheep has been used as currency, and its pronunciation is analogous to that of the Chinese proverb "xiang (fortune)", which often appears in Chinese proverbs (Yuan, 2013, p. 1). In traditional

Chinese religious beliefs, the sheep has long been regarded as a symbol of good fortune, a norm of benevolence and justice, and even as a deified totem and a sacred object of religion.

In China, the carp has a long association with Taoism. It first occurred during the Han Dynasty, when Liu Xiang of the Western Han Dynasty recorded a tale of an immortal riding on a carp in his book *The Legend of the Immortals*, which mentions the story of Qin Gao and Zi Ying ascending to heaven on a carp. Since then, the carp has been inextricably linked to Taoism and has therefore logically become a symbol of immortality. In Western Christianity, the fish is a symbol of abundance and faith, as observed in the story of the fish and the bread in the Bible. Christ and his disciples were also “fishers of men” and there are some biblical references to this. Here, fish is often used as a metamorphosis portraying mankind, while the ocean symbolises the abyss of guilt in which mankind finds himself.

Cultural Implications

Apart from religion, animal metaphors in proverbs are closely related to different cultural backgrounds, as proverbs are by themselves a microcosm of culture.

The Chinese proverb “Bend your head to be a child’s cow” describes a person willing to make sacrifices for the people like a willing ox, and also reveals an image of self-consciousness. “A cow is a farming treasure, no cattle only by hard work, get up early for nothing” directly conveys the idea that cattle is the wealth of a family that makes livelihood from farming. China has been an agrarian society since ancient times and the ox is the first livestock to be domesticated by man. It has made an indelible contribution to China’s long history of agriculture and economic society. The development of agricultural culture has also made ox increasingly important.

In England, however, the ox is used as a metaphor for manhood, a symbol of authority, and a fondness for competition with one another. In Germany the proverb “Den Stier bei den Hörnern packen/fassen” unquestionably uses the ox as bravery and impetus. This reflects the cultural background of the West. People are actively engaged in business and accumulating wealth; they are enthusiastically competitive and courageous in their pursuit of the utmost liberty and the eventual glorification of God through the realisation of personal values. In their sight, therefore, ox is ambitious, competitive, and hardworking animal that will constantly go after secular profits.

The proverb about the donkey “The donkey in the mill can’t get out of the trap” graphically reflects the donkey’s rigidity and stupidity. The proverb “Get rid of somebody as soon as he has done his job” shows that the donkey is benevolent and helpful, but ends up burying his life because of its simplicity. Whilst the donkey and the horse belong to the same tribe, the donkey does not have the strength, speed, and dexterity of the horse, so it frequently appears in the conventional cultural mindset as the antithesis of the horse and as an emblem of obtuseness.

The image of the donkey’s folly embodied in the English proverb “The donkey wags his ears” and the German “Ein Esel schimpft den anderen langohr” is not very distinguishable from a parallel proverb in Chinese. The same animal proverbs connote the same content. Different nations live in different milieux, but they also have something in common, since they share more or less the same species and the corresponding knowledge (Su, 2013, p. 1). But in Germany there is also an image of the donkey “störrisch wie ein Esel sein”. They use the word donkey to describe the intransigence of a person. As Germans were rarely receptive to the opinions of others, Europeans gradually began to dub Germans “stubborn donkeys”, a meaning that has been retained in the language.

Conclusion

A country's culture is inseparable from its language, which is reflected in particular linguistic forms with metaphorical meaning, such as proverbs. Due to historical and religious factors, they can be integrated and scrutinised to get a sense of the country's unique culture. Even the often unnoticed proverbs about animals can be smoothed out and their barriers slowly disappeared if they are intentionally investigated. Therefore, an extended understanding of animal metaphors in culturally embedded proverbs can further facilitate cross-cultural interactions.

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