

A Comparative Study of Animal Metaphors in English and Chinese*

ZHONG Jia-chen, ZOU Jian-lin

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Since Aristotle expounded on the concept of metaphor, metaphor research has gradually expanded from rhetoric to the field of cognitive linguistics. Due to animal's close connection with human activities, animal metaphor become important part of cross-cultural metaphor research. Animal metaphors in English and Chinese not only share certain cultural commonalities but also demonstrate distinct characteristics due to differences in historical traditions and social cognition. This paper analyzes the influence of cultural backgrounds on language expressions by comparing animal metaphors in Chinese and Western cultures. Research findings indicate that in the cross-cultural translation of animal metaphors, it is essential to take into account both the cultural connotations of the source language and the degree of acceptance in the target language, and to flexibly employ the strategies of domestication and foreignization to achieve the effective transmission of cultural information.

Keywords: animal idioms, metaphor, cultural differences, translation

Introduction

Metaphor is a fundamental way for humans to understand the world (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Its essence lies in constructing abstract concepts through mapping from the source domain to the target. Animal-related metaphors are among the most vivid expressions in human language. Whether it is “龙飞凤舞” in Chinese, or “busy as a bee” in English, these metaphors convey rich meanings through animal images. However, when these expressions cross cultural boundaries, problems arise--the same animal may carry completely opposite connotations in different languages. This paper focuses on the cultural differences of animal metaphors in English and Chinese. By comparing the symbolic meanings of some animals in the two languages, it reveals the underlying history and translation, living environments, and language customs.

Metaphor

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) proposed the “Conceptual Metaphor Theory”, emphasizing that metaphor is not only a rhetorical device but also a basic mode of human thinking. For example, the metaphor “时间就是金

* **Acknowledgement:** This paper is funded by the 2023 Australian Studies Program of Foundation for Australian Studies in China.

ZHONG Jiachen, postgraduate, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

ZOU Jianling, associate professor, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

钱” establishes an analogy between quantified time and money, transforming the abstract concept of time into a concrete economic resource. Traditionally, metaphor has always been regarded as a figure of speech in rhetoric (Hu Zhuanglin, 1998). Metaphor is the main mechanism for semantic extension and the basis for the diachronic evolution of semantics. This view can be called the cognitive view of metaphor (Wang Shuangmei, 2009:12). Wang Guangcheng (2000) believes that metaphor should not be merely considered as a rhetorical device and studied solely from a rhetorical perspective. Instead, it should be regarded as a basic means of cognitive thinking and be studied comprehensively, systematically from multiple angles.

As a fundamental cognitive tool, metaphor forms a mapping relationship between the tenor and the vehicle. Its essence is a language practice that explains abstract concepts through concrete experiences. In cross-cultural communication, metaphors can enhance the vividness and appeal of expressions. For example, the metaphor “东方巴黎” compares the urban cultural temperament of Shanghai with that of Paris, enabling readers to quickly construct an understanding of Shanghai’s international characteristics in a cross-linguistic context.

The core difference between metaphor and simile lies in that the former realizes meaning reconstruction through direct substitution of the tenor and the vehicle (such as “朱丽叶是太阳”), while the latter requires words like “like”, “as”, or “resemble” to establish an analogical relationship (such as “朱丽叶似太阳般耀眼”). This characteristics make metaphor more flexible in both Chinese and English expressions.

Animal Metaphor

Animal plays an important role in human life. “In the course of human development, people have received support from other entities. These entities are not superior beings, not angels, but inferior entities-animals” (Teller, 2005). Animal metaphors are very common in both language expressions. They link human behavioral characteristics with the animal characteristics through means such as association and analogy. Kövecses believes that the only way that these metaphorical meanings are generated is by applying human characteristics to animals and then applying these characteristics to humans. That is, animals are personified first, and then the human-based animal characteristics are used to understand human behavior. Through long-term observation of the biological characteristics of animals (such as the might of a lion and the cunning of a fox), humans project their own behavioral characteristics onto animal entities. Subsequently, through reverse mapping, animal characteristics are transformed into criteria for evaluating human nature. This process is particularly evident in idioms. For example, the Chinese idiom “狐假虎威” criticizes the phenomenon of power dependence by referring to the hierarchical relationship between animals. In English, “a wolf in sheep’s clothing” exposes human hypocrisy through the image of disguise. In daily life, due to close contact with animals, humans store the living habits, appearance characteristics, and behavior patterns of animals in their minds and gradually start to think and make associations about these cognitions.

When it comes to the metaphor translation, it essentially involves communication and coordination in terms of people’s ways of thinking, knowledge storage, and understanding of things from two different cultural backgrounds. Translators need to strike a balance between preserving the uniqueness of the source-language imagery and ensuring the acceptability of the target language. When the cultural connotations of animal metaphors highly overlap, the foreignization strategy can effectively convey the linguistic features. However,

when there are significant semantic conflicts, it is necessary to reconstruct the cognitive connection through the domestication or compensation strategy (Newmark, 1988).

A Comparative Analysis of Animal Metaphors in English and Chinese

Commonalities in Chinese and Western Cultures

“Wolf” and “狼”

By analyzing the types provided in the “Index of Chinese Folktale Types”(《中国民间故事类型索引》) by American scholar Ding Naidong, there are 22 types of stories about wolves in traditional Chinese folktales. In these stories, the image of wolves mostly exhibits similar characteristics-ferocity, greed, and stupidity (Liu Dan, 2008). In modern Western literature, there are many descriptions of wolves. In these depictions, wolves are often regarded as representatives of “animal nature”. For a long time, wolves have been regarded as symbols of “evil”, like a fixed symbol passed down. In both Chinese and Western cultures, “wolf” is regarded as a symbol of greed and danger. In Chinese, the idiom “狼子野心” implies a wicked and greedy nature. In English, “a wolf in sheep’s clothing” means to reflect the evil of human nature through the image of disguise. It can be literally translated as “a wolf dressed in sheep’s clothing”, achieving cultural equivalence by the foreignization strategy (Zhou Qiulu, Qi Wenhui, 2020).

“Fox” and “狐”

The fox is widely regarded as a symbol of “cunning”. This metaphor is rooted in the interaction between its unique biological habits and human observation experiences.

Firstly, it is directly influenced by its behavioral habits. Foxes are mostly nocturnal animals. They are good at using the terrain to hide their tracks, and their fur color blending with the environment is interpreted as being good at camouflage. For example, when hunting, foxes use fake movements to confuse their prey. This behavior is projected into human society, forming the meaning of being crafty and deceitful. Foxes often steal the prey of other animals (such as wolves and eagles) and even sneak into human settlements to steal food. This “parasitic” way of survival strengthens their negative image of being opportunistic.

The Chinese idiom “狐假虎威” reveals the hypocrisy of power-dependent people through the story of a fox bullying the weak by relying on the power of a tiger. The “fox-spirit” image in *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (《聊斋志异》) combines charm and cunning, reflecting the criticism on the complexity of human nature. In Western culture, *The Fox and the Grapes in Aesop’s Fables* satirizes self-deception through the “sour grapes” mentality of the fox. In Shakespeare’s plays, the fox is often used to represent political intrigue. People think the fox is cunning because they combine the fox’s survival schemes with human moral evaluations. That is, on the one hand, it is considered from the perspective of how these behaviors affect the fox’s survival, and on the other hand, it is due to various stories and sayings about foxes in culture. These two aspects work together to shape the fox’s image.

Individual Characteristics of Chinese and Western Cultures

“Dragon” and “龙”

Cultural images, as unique symbols of specific cultures, carry profound cultural connotations and values. In the systems of Chinese traditional culture and Western culture, although the two images of “dragon” and “龙” are somewhat related in terms of literal expression, their cultural connotations are vastly different.

In the context of Chinese traditional culture, “龙” occupies a crucial position. It is regarded as a sacred being endowed with great power, noble virtues, and auspicious meanings. Looking back at ancient history, “龙” was the exclusive symbol of emperors. The Han nationality also regards themselves as “龙的传人”, and this cultural identity is deeply rooted in the blood of the Chinese nation. In the Chinese idiom system, the connotation of “龙” is highly positive. For example, “望子成龙” expresses parents’ deep expectations for their children; “龙马精神” symbolizes the ambitious spirit of striving upwards and persevering. Overall, in Chinese culture, the image of “龙” generally presents a positive and upward-looking characteristic.

In contrast, in Western culture, “dragon” is regarded as a symbol of evil. The definition of “dragon” in *Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary* is: (in stories) a large aggressive animal with wings and a long tail, that can breathe out fire. Its image has nothing in common with the “龙” in Chinese culture. The root cause of this difference in cultural connotations lies in the religious beliefs and mythological allusions of Western countries. In the Christian classic *The Bible*, “the great dragon” is used to describe Satan, the devil who opposes God. This undoubtedly laid the foundation for the evil image of “dragon”. In ancient Greek mythology, the allusion “sow dragon’s teeth” literally means “plant dragon’s teeth”, but actually expresses “sow the seeds of destruction”, and is often used to describe “stirring up disputes and causing trouble”. To sum up, although the “龙” in Chinese culture and the “dragon” in Western culture are somewhat related in form, due to differences in cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs, and mythological legends, there is a huge gap in their cultural connotations.

Causes of Differences in Animal Metaphors between English and Chinese

Religious Beliefs

Religious beliefs, as the core part of culture, profoundly influence people’s understanding and perception of animal metaphors. In China, traditional religions such as Taoism and Buddhism advocate living in harmony with nature and emphasize the animism of all things. In Taoist culture, the tortoise, because of its long-life characteristic, has become a symbol of longevity and stability. It often appears in traditional architecture and paintings, carrying people’s wishes for a long life. After the introduction of Buddhism, its doctrines of compassion and the cycle of cause and effect have given some animals special meanings. For example, releasing birds is regarded as an act of accumulating good deeds, and birds symbolize freedom and transcendence. In the West, it is mainly influenced by Christianity, and *The Bible* is the cornerstone of culture and belief. In the stories of *The Bible*, the snake is regarded as a symbol of evil and temptation because it tempted Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. This concept is deeply ingrained in Western minds and is reflected in language, making snake-related metaphors mostly negative.

History and Traditions

Historical traditions are the accumulation of culture. Different historical development trajectories have shaped unique animal metaphor cultures. China has a farming civilization that has lasted for thousands of years. As an important farming assistant, ox has played a crucial role in long-term agricultural work. People highly praise the ox’s hard-working and uncomplaining qualities, and the “老黄牛” has become a synonym for hard-work and dedication. Horses were of great significance in ancient wars and transportation, symbolizing bravery and loyalty. For example, the phrase “马革裹尸” demonstrates the fearlessness and sacrifice spirit of

soldiers. In Western history, the development of maritime trade has led to frequent contact between people and marine life. Dolphins are regarded as the guardians of sailors because they often swim near ships, implying good luck and safety. In ancient Western cultures, the eagle was often associated with power and rule. Due to its sharp vision and strong hunting ability, it symbolized the sharp eyesight and powerful authority of rulers.

Mythological Legends and Folktales

Mythological legends and folktales are key to national cultural heritage, with animal images evolving into cultural symbols over generations.

China's mythological system is rich, with stories like “叶公好龙” endowing animals with symbolic meanings. The dragon signifies yearning and awe, while foxes in folktales represent both intelligence and cunning. Western mythologies, including Greek and Nordic, have also shaped animal metaphors. In Greek mythology, the owl symbolizes wisdom, while in Nordic tales, wolves are seen as fierce and dangerous, as seen in the story of Fenrir.

Translation Strategies

Translation is not merely an activity of simply converting one language into another. It also requires consideration of the use of language techniques to convey a great deal of cultural information hidden behind the words. As can be seen from the above-mentioned animal idiom metaphors in English and Chinese, the same animal may have similar metaphorical meanings in both languages, but also different metaphorical connotations. Moreover, different animals may imply the same metaphorical meaning. In the translation of animal idioms, translators should have a full understanding of the two cultural backgrounds and make adaptable choices.

Domestication

Domestication aims to make content culturally acceptable and resolve conflicts through localization. It involves choosing images familiar to the target audience to maintain the metaphor's communicative function. For example, translating “black sheep” as “害群之马” preserves the original meaning while aligning with Chinese readers' understanding. For metaphors with cultural differences, additional cultural information is provided through explanation or amplification.

Foreignization

Foreignization focuses on preserving the source culture's uniqueness by using literal translation or transliteration. This approach is suitable when the metaphorical image is similarly understood in both cultures. For instance, “a wolf in sheep's clothing” and “狐假虎威” both use the concept of disguise to reveal hypocrisy. Literal translation can maintain the metaphor's tension. The term “纸老虎” is translated as “paper tiger” because “tiger” symbolizes power in both cultures, allowing the metaphor to be successfully adopted into English.

Conclusion

This study compares English and Chinese animal metaphors, revealing cultural similarities and differences. Metaphorical meanings of wolves and foxes are similar across both cultures, while “龙” and “dragon” show

cultural influence. Translators must consider cultural connotations and target language acceptability, using domestication and foreignization strategies to convey cultural information and promote cross-cultural communication.

The research improves understanding of cultural significance in animal metaphors and offers practical guidance for translation. Future studies could explore the evolution of animal metaphors in globalization and their roles in cross-cultural communication across various fields, to understand the interaction between language and culture in metaphors.

References

- Hu, Z. L. (1998). Some issues concerning the pragmatic view of metaphor. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, (1), 7-10.
- Kövecses, Z. (2002). *Metaphor: A practical introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (2010). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Li, W., & Li, Y. L. (2014). The cultural connotations of “Fox” in English and Chinese and related idiomatic expressions and translations. *Journal of Language and Literature Studies*, (4), 43-45.
- Liu, D. (2008). The modern re-enchantment of the wolf image in Chinese and Western cultures (Dissertation: Shandong Normal University).
- Teller, E. B. (2005). *Primitive culture* (S. S. Lian, Trans.). Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press.
- Wang, G. C. (2000). The cognitive basis of metaphor and the similarities of cross-cultural metaphors. *Journal of Sichuan International Studies University*, (1).
- Wang, S. M. (2009). From rhetoric to cognition. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, (4).
- Zhou, Q. L., & Qi, W. H. (2020). An analysis of animal metaphors in English and Chinese idioms. *English Teachers*, 20(16), 182-184.