

# The Cultural Connotation of Animal Words in English and Chinese

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**Keywords:** Connotation; Animal Words; Language and culture

**Abstract:** In the long history, mankind has been contacted closely with animals in the long coexistence on the earth. And they have generated intricate feelings to animals like love, aversion, fear and so on, which they do not have toward the general objects. So a lot of animal-related vocabulary formed. Because of their difference in historical and cultural development, customs, social system, geographical environment and other aspects, the metaphor they bear also appear differences, thus giving animals a variety of different meanings. So if we want to have a good understanding of animal words, we have to know its cultural connotation. From the relationship between language and culture, and paper divided the animal words into three categories according to their different cultural connotations.

## 1. Introduction

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, human beings enter into an era of economic globalization, and information networks, exchanging without borders. As countries around the world are becoming more and more open in trade policy, modern society have developed rapidly. As development of scientific technology, people communicate more and more frequently in real life and on the Internet. People from different regions have undergone a great change from collision to fusion in the process of exchanging different cultures. In this situation, it is a necessity to master the cultural connotation.

Researchers found that animals and people's lives are closely linked, and then form a special group of words -- animal words. It is a popular fixed word with specific meaning, which plays a very important part in people's everyday life. Animals carry not only a country's track of material culture development from ancient times to present but also carry the cultural essence like political concepts, cultural concepts, and aesthetic concepts of people from different regions. These words have rich emotional and cultural connotations. It can reflect the social and cultural background, even the customs and ways of thinking, which may directly or indirectly bear the cultural traditions of different nationalities. Different animal represent different meaning in a certain cultural life. Due to the cultural differences, Chinese and Westerners have different understandings of animal words. If we neglect the their cultural differences, it is hard to understand the meaning of each animal word, and thus causing misunderstanding or even worse consequences.

Firstly, from the comparison and analysis of the connotations about animal words in the two cultures, we can know more about the cultural origins and development of our motherland which is one of the four ancient civilizations with a long history of over 5,000 years. We can feel more of the uniqueness of our Chinese nation in the world, and national pride will deepen in the heart spontaneously. Secondly, the knowledge about cultural connotation of animal words can be helpful to understand more precisely the artistic conception of different language. In the literary works, animal words are widely used in environmental description to render and contrast the theme. Only when we completely grasp the connotation of animal words can we have a thorough understanding of the literary works. Finally, the attention on the cultural difference of animal words enables people to "know ourselves and never offend others" in the cross-cultural communication. In today's "global village", people in different countries communicate and interact much more in work, daily

life and other fields. Only by avoiding cultural conflict can cross-cultural communication get a substantial success.

## **2. Language and Culture**

Culture is embodied through language, at the same time, culture has a profound influence on language. Without culture, language can hardly develop. They two affect each other and also interact with each other. All in all, culture promotes the development of language, and vice versa.

### **2.1 The Relationship between Language and Culture**

We all know, culture and language are inseparable. To make it clear, this paper will analyze the relationship between language and culture from the following three aspects:

Firstly, language has cultural characteristics, it is a very important part of culture. Obviously, language is a spiritual wealth created by mankind in the process of human evolution in the long history. Second, just like culture, language is also not a biological inheritance but acquired and learned later by people. Moreover, culture is shared by the whole society, so is the language. They all are common wealth of the whole nation.

Secondly, language is like a mirror which reflects a nation's culture and reveals the content of the national culture. Through a national language, people can understand the nation's lifestyles, customs, way of thinking and other cultural characteristics. For example, most foreigners will be confused by the different name of Chinese relatives. In English, there are only uncle and aunt two words, but there are "bo, shu, gu, jiu, yi" in Chinese. So, there is a big difference between English and Chinese in the form of linguistic expressions of siblings of both parents.

Thirdly, Language and culture interact and restrict each other. This bidirectional relationship can be cognized from two aspects. Cultural composition is closely connected with thinking. Spiritual culture as well as material culture are all the product of thinking. Language, as a tool of thinking, affects and restricts the way of thinking to a certain extent. However, when the language form can not meet the needs or even hinder the development of human, people will change thinking tools consciously or unconsciously, and eventually promote the development of language.

The vitality of culture lies in its extensive spread. As a tool of cultural communication, language has a great effect on the spread of culture. And also it is the power for culture to survive. On the other hand, due to the spread of culture, especially the alien culture, some new words and expressions emerge in the language.

### **2.2 The Classification of Animal Words in English and Chinese**

The natural environment and social environment that mankind relies on exist some similarities more or less, which makes mankind have many common life experience, so that the two different cultures between the east and the west also show the commonness of language in the overlapping part.

#### **2.2.1 The Different Animals Words with the Same Connotation**

People in different countries sometimes have a common understanding of certain attributes of animals, thus producing similar associations. When people use animal idioms with the basic attributes, their metaphorical equivalents are similar, so these animal idioms show similar cultural characteristics. This kind of animal idiom uses the same rhetorical technique, shows the same cultural image, and expresses the same meaning both in literal and associative sense. For example, people often use bee to describe "busy (as busy as bee)", use snail to describe "slow (as slow as snail)", use pig to describe "dirty and greedy (as dirty and greedy as a pig)", sometimes pig are used to describe "obesity (as fat as a pig)", use parrot to describe people who imitate others' words (to parrot what other people say), use toad to describe "ugly (as ugly as a toad)", and Chinese culture has an idiom "Toad wants to eat swan." Also people use fox to describe "slyness (as sly as a fox, a sly old fox)", use monkey to describe "flexibility", use cock to describe "proud", use snake to

express “insidious and cunning”, use wolf to express “cruelty, violence and greed”. The animal idiom, which is similar to the appearance, is a phenomenon of cultural overlap.

### **2.2.2 The Same Animals Words with the Different Connotation**

People’s different understandings of the objective world lead to different thinking modes and angles of view. These differences are caused by different cultural atmosphere. We all know that dogs are loved and appreciated by westerner. Dogs are greatly loved in the family, and are regarded as the most loyal friends to mankind. They are often used to describe human life and behavior. For instance, A dog with two tails; a dumb dog; a jolly dog; a sea dog; a lucky dog; put on the dog; Let sleeping dog lie; a gay dog; Love me, love my dog. These idioms about dogs reflect the importance of dogs in Western culture. While in China, dog has a strong derogatory meaning, which is often associated with despicable and evil-minded images. For example, there are some Chinese phrases like “zou gou”, “gou tui zi”, “lang xin gou fei”, “gou zui li tu bu chu xiang ya”. It is hard to imagine what kind of facial expression will appear, if you say “You are a dog with two tails” to a Chinese who does not understand the cultural differences between English and Chinese.

Bats are regarded as auspicious and happy symbol in China, while in the western culture the association of bats is completely different, the bat is considered as an evil animal, and it is ugly and ferocious. For example, “You are as blind as a bat.”

Owl is a symbol of wisdom in English. Sometimes people will use “as wise as an owl” to describe a smart person. But in Chinese, owl is considered to be an ominous thing, because owl acts at night, and the cry of owl is miserable. People think that the owl is a sign of death, which makes people frightened. This is due to the superstition of people.

Silkworm in English culture has no other meaning but only a very ordinary insect, but in Chinese culture, this word praises the dedication of silkworm, because it eats mulberry leaves, then it spits out the silk. For example, a Chinese proverb “chun can dao si si fang jin”, this metaphor is marked with an indelible cultural imprint.

### **2.2.3 The Same Animals Words with the Same Connotation**

The cultural individuality is widespread through the entire national culture. When people from different language backgrounds use animal words, their choice of words is closely related to their cultural habits. Therefore, you may have to choose different metaphor body if you want to express the same figurative meanings according to different culture backgrounds.

In Chinese culture, tiger is always seen as the king of the forest. So, a lot of phrases have the word “tiger”. For example, there is a Chinese idiom “ying xiong hu dan”. However, in the Western culture, lion is regarded as the king of animals. Tiger and lion have the same symbolic meaning in different cultural backgrounds, that is bravery, strength, vigor and dignity. In English, there is phrase like majestic as a lion. But, in Chinese culture, the lion is just a ferocious beast. So, the phrase “lan lu hu” in Chinese can be understood like “a lion in the way or a lion in the path” in English.

In English, “ass” symbolizes stupid, “make an ass of oneself” means to make a fool of oneself; “He is a silly ass for he believes everything he is told” can be paraphrased like “He is so stupid for he believes everything that others said”. In Chinese culture, bears are thought to be slow and clumsy animals. People often use bear to express “stupid”, even to express “useless and incompetent”. “ni zhen xiong” in Chinese means “You’re stupid” in English, and another sentence “qiao ni zhe xiong yang” just can be understood like “You are really useless” in English.

## **3. Conclusion**

Through the brief exploration and comparison about the cultural connotation carried by the animal words in Chinese and English, we know that the metaphorical meanings of animal words differ greatly in these two language. This is not only a single linguistic phenomenon but also a social and cultural phenomenon, highlighting the cultural identity of different nationalities, so we have to understand it from a cross-cultural perspective, that is, not only to pay attention to cultural

commonality, but also pay attention to their individuality. Only when we combine cultural commonality and personality together can we promote cross-cultural communication in depth.

Moreover, it is essential for us to understand the cultural connotations of animal words which can make the world become less mysterious. Meanwhile, people can get a deeper understanding of a certain language, being alert in learning not only the denotations of words, but also the connotations of meaning. So if people want to have a good understanding of animal words, they must pay more attention to cultural connotations besides their phonetics and spelling. It is very necessary for us to promote the understanding the different cultures and thus shorten the distance between people in these two countries.

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