

Chinese and Western Cultural Connotations and Translation of the Chinese Zodiac and Related Idioms

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Abstract

In the process of the development of human civilization, people often give different cultural connotations to various animals in order to meet different social needs, so as to convey their own language messages and emotional thoughts. Due to different social customs, religious beliefs and other factors, the cultural connotations given to the same animals in China and the West are sometimes very different. In this paper, the author will compare and analyze the Chinese Zodiac, including many Chinese and Western animal words, so that readers can have a better understanding of the animal words in the Chinese zodiac and avoid misunderstandings in the translation process due to the cultural differences between the two sides.

Keywords

Chinese Zodiac; Chinese and Western Culture; Idiom Translation.

1. Introduction

The Chinese zodiac, also called zodiacal signs, represents the twelve animals of the twelve earthly branches that are used to remember the year of birth of a person, namely, mouse, bull, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog, and boar (Dictionary Editorial Office, Institute of Linguistics, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2005: 1221). In China, each Chinese zodiac sign has a wide range of legends, which form a system of conceptual interpretations and become a figurative philosophy in folk culture, such as the sign of the zodiac in marriage, temple prayers, and the current year of life. In modern times, more people use the Chinese zodiac as a symbol of good luck for the Spring Festival and as a symbol of entertainment and cultural activities.

The idiom is a part of national culture and has an abiding relationship with the traditional culture of each nation, i.e., classical literature, religious beliefs, customs and traditions. The use of animal metaphors to compare the qualities of characters is a common phenomenon in both English and Chinese idioms, and the same animal can have completely different or contradictory meanings in two different languages and cultures. One of the main objects of this paper, “animal image”, belongs to the category of ecological culture and crosses over between various cultural forms, which has extremely rich cultural connotation and is an important category to be studied by cultural translation theory.

2. Similarities and Differences in the Connotation of These Animal Vocabulary in Chinese and Western Cultures

2.1. The Same Animals have the Same Cultural Connotation in Chinese and Western Cultures

2.1.1. 鼠 (Rat/Mouse)

Both English and Chinese despise rats because they steal, so both languages have a derogatory and not a positive meaning. In the eyes of the Chinese, all words related to rats or mice have a pejorative meaning: “鼠目寸光” is a metaphor for people who are short-sighted and have no vision. “贼眉鼠眼” describes people with a sneaky look. In Western culture, people have the same aversion to mice and rats. In the British and American countries, the word “rat” means “traitor”. The phrases formed by rat or mouse often contain pejorative overtones, such as “rat on” (背弃、出卖某人), “rat race” (为社会地位所做的寡廉鲜耻、卑鄙的竞争), “rat out” (临阵脱逃) and “to mouse out the secret”(窥探秘密).

2.1.2. 虎 (Tiger)

In Chinese, the tiger is the “king of all animals”, symbolizing brave, powerful and violent, both in positive and derogatory sense. When used in a positive sense, it is often used to describe a person's bravery, courage, tenacity or vigor, such as “虎啸生风”, “生龙活虎”, “卧虎藏龙”. Because of the tiger's natural attribute of fierceness and cruelty, it also has a derogatory meaning, such as “为虎作伥”, “狐假虎威”, “养虎遗患” etc. The image of tiger in English is similar to that of lion. The lion is a symbol of power and the British have the name “the British Lion” for themselves. In addition, there is “bold as a lion”, “lionhearted”, “kings and bears often worry their keepers”(伴君如伴虎). In common with English and Chinese, tiger can be used to describe a fierce, sarcastic woman, and there are both the expression -- tigress.

2.1.3. 兔 (Hare/Rabbit)

Among the 12 Chinese zodiac signs, the rabbit is the most adored animal. Rabbits are very popular among children, and there are numerous fairy tales, legends and games about them. At the same time, rabbits are also alert and agile, as the Chinese idiom goes: “狡兔三窟”, “静如处子, 动若脱兔”. In English slang, hare refers to a person who rides a bus without buying a ticket. Make hare of somebody means to fool someone; first catch your hare translates as “不要过于乐观”. As we can see, hare has a derogatory meaning, so in order to more accurately convey the Chinese cultural connotation, it is more appropriate to translate rabbit as “兔”.

2.1.4. 蛇 (Snake)

In both English and Chinese, snake has a derogatory meaning. In Chinese, the legends of snakes are all demons, while in English, snake is the incarnation of the devil in the Bible. In Chinese, there are “人心不足蛇吞象”, “蛇蝎心肠”, “杯弓蛇影”. In English, there are “a snake in the bosom(背信弃义的人)”, “wake snakes(闹事之人)”, “snakes in Iceland(乌有之物)”.

2.1.5. 鸡 (Rooster/Cock)

There are many idioms and words related to roosters or cocks in Chinese, such as “闻鸡起舞”, “鸡犬升天”, “鸡飞蛋打”, “鸡鸣狗盗”, etc. We often think of chicken when we talk about pride, which is consistent with the Western countries, “as proud as a cock” or even directly use “cocky” to describe the proud look, chicken also means wuss, coward, such as “chicken heart (胆小鬼)” and “chicken out (临阵脱逃)”.

2.1.6. 猪 (Pig)

Pig is a word we often use to denigrate others, and in Chinese it is often used to describe a person as stupid, greedy, lazy and dirty, as it is in English. Its image is dirty and ugly, combining “lazy”, “greedy”, “covetous” and “stupid”, and it is often described as a greedy, sleepy, rude and annoying selfish person. A typical example is “as greedy and dirty as a pig”, which we can directly translate as “像猪一样贪心, 不注意卫生”.

2.2. The Same Animals have Different Cultural Connotation in Chinese and Western Cultures

2.2.1. 狗 (Dog)

The metaphorical meaning of dog is very different in English and Chinese. In Chinese, dog has a derogatory meaning, such as “人模狗样”, “丧家之犬”, “狼心狗肺”, etc. Although dog has a derogatory meaning in English, such as “treat sb. like a dog (待某人如猪狗)” and “give a dog a bad name (人言可畏)”, there are more positive meanings being used, and the most quoted ones are “a lucky dog (幸运儿)”, “the dogs” (绝妙的事物)” and “every dog has its day” (风水轮流转).

2.2.2. 龙 (Dragon)

The role of dragon in Chinese culture is a symbol of emperor and power, which is sacred and noble, such as “龙凤呈祥”, “龙雕凤咀”, “龙肝豹胎”, “龙飞凤舞”. On the contrary, in English, dragon is ferocious and derogatory. It is often used as a metaphor for vicious woman, such as “Here be dragons (有危险的地方)”, “sow dragon's teeth (种下祸根)”, etc.

2.2.3. 猴 (Monkey)

In Chinese culture, the monkey is an auspicious animal and plays an important role. In Chinese, “猴” has the same sound as “侯”, which is one of the official titles in ancient China, so people like to use monkeys in paintings to symbolize good luck. If a monkey and a bee are drawn together, it means “马上封侯”. If a monkey is riding on the back of a horse, it means “辈辈封侯”. In the West, monkey is a pejorative term for scourge and curiosity. In Christian culture, monkeys are often seen as a scandal to humans, a sign of vain greed and lust, among other vices. The monkey in chains is a symbol of the vanquished devil. In modern culture, monkeys are seen as clever and mischievous animals and are often used as a metaphor for nasty, playful or mischievous urchins, mischief-makers or gullible people. English idioms related to monkey, mostly with a certain derogatory meaning, such as “monkey shines (恶作剧或胡闹)”, “make a monkey of sb. (愚弄, 把某人当猴耍)”, “monkey with sb. (愚弄某人)”, “monkey business (秘密或非法的活动)” etc.

2.3. The Different Animals have Similar Cultural Connotations in Chinese and Western Cultures

2.3.1. 牛 (Caw) 和马 (Horse)

In the West, horses are highly regarded, just as cows are in the Chinese culture. The horse represents a courageous, unstoppable national spirit, and the Chinese also use the metaphor of a “千里马” for talent, as well as idioms such as “马到成功”, “马首是瞻”, “万马奔腾”. In the West, horses have been a part of people's lives since ancient times, comparable to the status of cows in our lives, such as we use cows to describe hard work. For example, we use caw to describe hard-working in Chinese while in English we use “to work like a horse”; English speakers say “talk horse” while the Chinese people say “吹牛”; The Chinese describe cows are strong, but in English the expression “as strong as a horse” is used. There are also many everyday idioms related to horses, so when translating these phrases into Chinese, we must pay attention to the

image conversion method, such as “back the wrong horse (支持了失败的一方)”, “be on the high horse (目空一切)”, “flog a dead horse (徒劳)”.

2.3.2. 羊 (Sheep) 和羊 (Goat)

In Chinese people's eyes, sheep has the beauty of auspiciousness, meekness, elegance and peace, and is a symbol of good harvest, prosperity of people and animals, and peace of the country. In English, sheep are divided into sheep and goat. In Western culture, sheep and goat have very different cultural connotations. Goat has always been considered to be associated with lust, debauchery and sin, and is said to be the embodiment of the devil. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus called himself a shepherd and referred to the people of his parish as sheep, “separating the sheep from the goats” meaning “把好人和坏人区分开”. The lamb is a symbol of the Christian savior in English culture, and Jesus is called the “lamb of God”.

3. Conclusion

In the process of translation, the translator needs to do a lot of preparatory work, fully understand the meaning of the original text and the ideas the author wants to express, and then translate it into a text that conforms to Chinese customs. Regardless of whether free translation or literal translation is used, it is important that the reader understands the cultural connotation that is intended to be expressed in the text.

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