

# On the Translation of Chinese and English Animal Idioms from an Intercultural Perspective

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## Abstract

**Translation process is not only a linguistic activity, but also a cultural activity. The influence of cultural differences on translation is fundamental. This paper analyzes and discusses the translation of Chinese and English animal idioms from the perspective of intercultural communication, and probes into the strategies and specific translation methods to deal with cultural factors in translation. The purpose of this paper is to improve the understanding and translation of Chinese and English animal idioms from a cross-cultural perspective, so as to reduce the obstacles in intercultural communication between the two languages and truly achieve the purpose of communication.**

## Keywords

**Translation; Chinese and English animal idioms; Intercultural communication.**

## 1. Introduction

With the rapid development of globalization, the need of intercultural communication has become more and more important, and the intercultural communication touches nearly every aspects, such as politics, trade, economy, education, tourism, so on and so forth. According to Carley H. Dodd (2006:4), the term intercultural communication refers to the influence of cultural variability and diversity on interpersonally oriented communication outcomes. People from different countries are eager to learn about Chinese culture, while China is also keen to exchange with the outside world. No one can be exclusive in the global village. As a developing country, China has always been committed to communicating with other countries and are increasingly emerging on the international stage. China's achievements today are inseparable from its intercultural communication. However, language barriers between countries would definitely stand in the way of communication, therefore, translation becomes a crucial factor in promoting intercultural communication.

Newmark (1981:183) once said: "A language is partly the repository and reflection of a culture." Snell-Hornby (1988) holds that translation process can no longer be envisaged as being between two languages but between two cultures involving "cross-cultural transfer". Similarly, some other famous translation theorists, such as Conacher (1996:169) and Holz-Manttari (Zhang Meifang, 2001:17) also take translation as a kind of intercultural translation. So, translation is not just translating one kind of language into another, but also it is a process of intercultural exchange. Therefore, when we are doing translation or interpretation, we should attach great importance in considering the cultural factor. We should not be limited to the source text, but should find the cultural equivalent of the source language in the target language. Language is the carrier of culture, while idioms are full of rich and colorful cultural information. Idioms have become the essence of language through people's long-term use. They are important components of a society's language and culture. Most of the world's languages have their own idioms. Idioms relate to all aspects. However, the definition of idiom is still controversial till today. But, what we can know is that idiom is a set of fixed language expressions that people express their understanding and thoughts of objective things in the

long life practice, including stereotyped phrases, short sentences, colloquialisms, slangs and proverbs. Idioms have their unique cultural background, semantic structure and language charm, which is the essence of national culture. Like a mirror, they reflect the cultural characteristics of a nation. Among them, idioms related to animals occupy a large proportion because human beings have kept close contact with animals during the long history. Humans have special and complicated feelings for animals, including love, disgust or fear. In this way, many words related to animals are formed. Through the study of Chinese and English animal idioms, we can understand the similarities and differences of cultural connotations between English and Chinese to a certain extent.

## 2. Literature Review

There are relatively few studies on animal idioms in foreign countries. Early linguists mainly classify and interpret the origin and expression of idioms. One of the representative linguist is Smith (1925) of English. In his research, animal idioms were included in the classification of idioms. He classified and explained the communicative functions of animal idioms, and divided them to express emotions, attitudes, wishes, hope, determination, irritation, curse and so on. In his book *Words and Idioms*, he listed more than 2,000 English idioms in more than 30 etymologies.

Besides, foreign linguists divide animal idioms on the basis of animal habits. Christine Ammer (1999) divides animal idioms into pet idioms such as cat and dog, bird idioms, idioms related to pasture animals, park animal idioms and aquatic animal idioms. Among all the animals, there are more idioms related to horses and dogs (L.P Smith, 1925) as the British people are more active in hunting, horse racing and dog racing.

On the classification of animal idioms, domestic scholar Luo Shiping (2005) divided them into four categories, namely, land animal idioms, flying bird idioms, aquatic animal idioms and insect idioms. However, professor Ping Hong and professor Zhang Guoyang (2001) classified animal idioms into noun idioms and verb idioms.

In the study of animal idioms, there are mainly English and Chinese comparative method, metaphorical cognitive method, contextual learning method, root-seeking method and translation comparative method. For example, Deng Yanchang, Liu Runqing (1989) and Wang Dechun (2003) advocate using the English and Chinese comparative method to study the cultural connotation of English and Chinese animal idioms while professor Ping Hong, professor Zhang Guoyang (2001) and professor Zhuang Hecheng (2002) emphasize the use of root-seeking method for research.

## 3. Factors Affecting Metaphoric Meanings of Animal Idioms

Animals are endowed with different cultural connotations due to several factors. Generally speaking, there are four main reasons. Geographical environment is one of the main factors contributing to cultural differences. Due to the geographical differences, the climate and environment can be totally different. People have to adapt to their living environment so they naturally formed their own living habits or life experience, thus producing many words with national cultural significance.

Besides, different customs and traditions are also the reasons because some idioms come from them. Moreover, religious belief has a profound influence on human cultural life. Most westerners are influenced by Christianity, and some English animal idioms come from the Bible. But the Chinese are deeply influenced by Buddhism, especially in ancient China, so there are some Chinese animal idioms from Buddhism although not too many.

## 4. A Comparison of Metaphors and Associations Between Chinese and English Animal Idioms

As animal idioms contain rich cultural connotations of a nation, they will certainly bring challenges to the intercultural communication between different nations. In this section, five types of metaphors and associations of Chinese and English animals idioms are discussed.

### 4.1. The Same Animals Sharing Similar Metaphorical Meanings

Although the cultural differences between China and western countries are large, there are still some common life experience. People in different countries tend to have a common understanding of certain attributes of animals, thus producing similar associations. When animal idioms are used from the animal's basic properties, the metaphorical meaning is equal, and these animal idioms show similar cultural characteristics. Such animal idioms use the same rhetorical devices to show the same cultural image so the same meaning is expressed literally and figuratively. Take "bee" for example. In both Chinese and English cultures, the metaphoric meaning of "bee" is much the same, referring to describe someone who is busy, hard-working and diligent. The English idiom "as busy as bee" has the same meaning in Chinese, that is "像蜜蜂一样忙碌". Take "toad" for another example. In both Chinese and English, the word "toad" not only refers to a kind of animal, but also it is used to describe someone ugly. In English, there is an idiom "as ugly as a toad", and in Chinese there is a idiom "癞蛤蟆想吃天鹅肉". Obviously, in both idioms the word "toad" conveys similar cultural connotation here. Some other examples of the same animals bearing similar associative meanings are as follows: as slow as a snail, as fat as a pig, to parrot what other people say, as sly as a fox, as clever as a monkey, as stupid as an ass and so on. In these examples, the English animals words all have the similar cultural connotation as in Chinese, so it is easy for both Chinese and English-speaking people to understand those idioms.

### 4.2. The same Animals Sharing Different Metaphorical Meanings

As the British and Chinese live in the places with totally different cultural backgrounds, they naturally form different animal concepts and give them different meanings. In the English and Chinese languages, it is usually the case that the same animal with the same concept has a completely different cultural connotation. For example, the English word "dragon" equals the Chinese word "龙". Although both words refer to the same animal, they bear different cultural meanings. In English, "dragon" is a kind of animal with wings and claws, which can breathe fire. It stands for evil things and it usually destroy everything. According to Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary, "dragon" is a derogatory metaphor referring to fierce person, especially a woman"(Hornby, 2002:437). So, it is not difficult to find that in some English literature works or films there are heroes who get glorious victories by fighting against a dragon. However, "dragon" in China is a holy animal and it bears totally different meaning in Chinese. In ancient China, "dragon" is used to refer to the emperor and his supreme power, so emperors were called "真龙天子"(sons of the heaven) in the past. It is full of positive meaning. Chinese people always regard themselves as "龙的传人" (descendants of the dragon). In some Chinese idioms, "dragon" is also used to refer to something excellent. For example, "龙马精神" refers to someone who is full of energy; "龙凤呈祥" refers to something auspicious; "卧虎藏龙" refers to persons who are the hidden talents.

In addition, phoenix, bat, cat, magpie and other animals also have different cultural connotations in English and Chinese cultures.

### 4.3. Different Animals Sharing Similar Metaphorical Meanings

Although some animals have different conceptual meanings in English and Chinese, they have similar cultural connotations. For example, “tiger” and “lion” are regarded as animals with features of bravery, power, vigor, decisiveness and dignity. Both animals are thought of the kings of forest. However, Chinese prefers using “tiger” to describe something or someone that is powerful, while “lion” is just a kind of fierce animal in their opinion. So, there are some relevant idioms like “一山不容二虎”, which means that it is impossible to have two or more the most powerful men stay together at the same time; “伴君如伴虎”, which is used to mean being in the king's company is tantamount to living with a tiger, so here it's very obvious that “tiger” is used to stand for a king, a monarch or someone who has much power. If we take a look at the English culture, however, we can find that the westerners prefer “lion” much more. They use the lion as a symbol of their country and there was once a very famous cartoon movie called *The Lion King*, but not “*The Lion Tiger*”. There are various idioms related to “lion” like “regal as a lion”, “majestic as a lion”, “put one's head into the lion's mouth”. It is very clear that “tiger” in Chinese bears the similar cultural connotation with “lion” in English. So the Chinese idiom “拦路虎”, if translated into English, it should be “a lion in the way” or “a lion in the path”, but not “a tiger in the way”.

### 4.4. The Same Animal Without Corresponding Metaphorical Meanings In English or in Chinese

The same animal word may have rich meaning in English, but not in Chinese. Take “white elephant” for instance. To Chinese, white elephant is just a kind of animal with two long tusks, thick skin and long nose and has nothing to do with any cultural connotation. But, from the view of westerners, white elephant is not just a kind of animal but also bears meaning of heavy, big but useless. China once produced a battery with its brand name “white elephant”, but this kind of battery could hardly be sold in western countries. The truth is that it is the name “white elephant” that makes this product a drug on the market. And there are some other animals such as oyster, beaver, sardine and so on which are full of cultural connotations in English but not in Chinese.

## 5. Methods of Translating Chinese and English Animal Idioms

Generally speaking, the translation of Chinese or English animal idioms is similar to the way other works are translated, but there are differences because of the cultural factors. In this section, five types of translation methods are mainly talked about.

### 5.1. Literal Translation

Literal translation is applicable when the same animals share similar cultural connotations in both English and Chinese cultures. This translation method can retain the original cultural characteristics and is recommended if possible. In this case, translators can reproduce the same images in the target language. As is mentioned above, some idioms like “as slow as a snail”, “as fat as a pig”, “to parrot what other people say” and so on are translated from English through literal translation. Literal translation can enlarge the communicative scope of the two languages and enable them to absorb each other, thus enriching the two languages. However, literal translation has some limitations. For example, when the same animal words represent different cultural connotations, literal translation can lead to confusion and reduce the efficiency of cultural communication.

### 5.2. Literal Translation with Adding Notes

In order to retain the cultural information contained in the original text, people prefer using literal translation. However, literal translation is likely to cause ambiguity due to the different

culture backgrounds. Under such circumstances, adding appropriate notes can help convey the cultural information in the original text. This method is especially useful when the same animals share different cultural connotations. For example, the Chinese idiom “坐山观虎斗”, if we just translate it into “sitting on a hill watching tigers fight” according to the literal meaning, people of English-speaking countries would properly think there are really three tigers fighting with each other when someone is watching. In this case, we’d better add some notes to explain to make sure that the cultural meaning can be delivered. So this idiom is better to be translated into “sitting on a hill watching tigers fight -- take a side in a fight until one party overwhelms their enemy.”

### 5.3. Equivalent Translation

Equivalent translation can be applied to different animal words expressing the same cultural connotations. That is, translators can replace the image in the source language with a corresponding target language image. For example, it is better to translate the Chinese idiom “亡羊补牢” into “to lock the door after the horse is stolen” instead of “to lock the door after the sheep is stolen” because horse is more in line with the customs and cultural connotations of western people. Take the English idiom “be a tiger” for another example. To accord with Chinese thinking style, this idiom should be translated into “像狼一样” instead of “像虎一样” in that tiger has less derogatory meaning in Chinese than in English. Here, the tiger in English has the same cultural association with the wolf in Chinese, meaning ferocious and cruel.

### 5.4. Free Translation

Due to the cultural differences, sometimes it is hard to reproduce the same images in the target language and adding notes would make the idioms too long. In this case, it is better to retain the original meaning of an idiom and does not retain the original form of its expression methods, that is, translate its meaning. This translation method is usually used in translating idioms in which the same animal image doesn’t have corresponding culture connotations in English or in Chinese and in translating idioms when the same animal sharing different cultural connotations. For instance, the Chinese idiom “虎头虎脑” is used to describe a naive and healthy child. However, if it is translated into “tiger’s head and brain” literally, people of English-speaking nations would definitely think that “tiger head” is terrible or ugly, or they would have other associations but to relate to its actual meaning. So in this situation, it is best to just translate this idiom into “naive and healthy”.

## 6. Conclusion

In this global village, cultural exchange is a powerful trend. Translation, as an important means of cross-cultural communication, builds the bridge over oceans between two different cultures as well as two languages. As an important part of a language, idioms are full of rich and colorful cultural information, so it is of far reaching significance of studying and translating Chinese and English idioms. Therefore, translators should take culture factor into consideration when translating those idioms, and this requires them to possess abundant knowledge, and most importantly, cross-cultural awareness.

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