

The Multiple Functions of Animal-Specific Words

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Abstract: Based on practice, this paper highlights the usage of animal-specific words and phrases from the multiple perspectives of vividness, imagery, succinctness, profundity, wits and wisdom, etc. Meanwhile copious references are cited as a compelling proof to the aesthetic value of animal-specific wording, complemented by comparisons between Chinese and English versions. If aptly applied, animal-specific wording spices up a description considerably.

Key words: *animal-specific wording; connotations; brevity; wisdom; images*

英语动物词汇的功能和用法

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摘要: 以实践为基础, 对英语动物词汇和短语的若干用法进行了系统归纳, 从动物词汇表达的生动性、形象性、简洁性、丰富性和趣味性等多个角度对这些用法进行了全面阐释, 并引用丰富的例句来加以说明, 同时借助英语和汉语对同一内容的不同表达方式进行对比, 进一步说明动物词汇恰当而灵活的运用能取得美妙的修辞效果。

关键词: 动物词汇; 内涵; 简洁; 睿智; 形象

中图分类号: H 313 **文献标志码:** A **文章编号:** 1009-895X(2004)02-0105-05

DOI: 10.13256/j.cnki.jusst.sse.2014.02.002

The animal-specific words in the English vocabulary are mostly associated with the qualities unique to an animal or a living thing. In some cases, these animal-specific words are descriptive or emblematic of an image. Among others, “butterfly stroke” is a swimming style with both arms moving simultaneously like the wings of a butterfly; “crow’s feet” is suggestive of the feet of many-toed crows planted on the corner of the eye; “zebra-crossing” is characterized with longitudinal stripes bearing a resemblance to those on the body of a zebra;

“swallow-tailed suit” obviously evokes the image of a coat with the design of a swallow-tail; “hawk-nosed” is self-evidently a nose in the shape of hawk; to name just a few.

In general practice, the animal-specific words reveal the phenomena of the human society through illumination, illustration and exposition. For example, “perking order”, based on the dominance in the chickens, has come to be associated with the hierarchical order in the human society; “rat race”, which stems from the frantic running about of rats in a

收稿日期: 2014-01-08

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maze, is analogized to the break-neck competition of the human beings; so on and so forth.

A considerable part of the animal-specific English words, however, are devoid of the intrinsic qualities of the animal itself, and the meanings are well-defined and well-established in the usage though these meanings defy rational explanation. The following examples suffice to serve as a compelling proof: “puppy love” denotes love between two teenagers, which obviously has nothing to do with a “puppy”; the compound-word “white elephant” refers to something worthless though an elephant in the color of “white” may prove to be the opposite; “a night owl” is a person who likes to stay up late and “a wet hen” is a shrewd woman, in both cases neither “owl” nor “hen” seems to suggest such qualities in reality.

Some animal-specific idioms feature brevity of expression and clarity of meanings. The well-rhymed “more bark than bite” connotes more words than deeds of a person albeit ostensibly referring to a dog.

The usage of animal-specific wording presumably boils down to the following distinctive features.

I. Animal-Specific Words Convey More than a Straightforward Statement

Each species of animals has its salient features, positive or otherwise. For example, the fox is crafty; the lion is ferocious; the monkey is mischievous, to name just a few. Based on the analogy between the animal-specific properties and an object of reference, the vividness of the expression is brought into bold relief. The following pairs of sentences shed light on the nuanced effect through the use of animal-specific wording.

例1 (1) A snake in the grass poses the greatest threat.

(2) The hidden enemy is the most dangerous.

例2 (1) He was a fastened oyster about his business deal.

(2) He kept a tight lip about his business deal.

例3 (1) He is a sly old fox.

(2) He is shrewd and crafty.

例4 (1) The young man was a lost sheep.

(2) The young man went astray.

II. Animal-Specific Expressions are More Graphic than Literary Statements

The English sentences cited below are amply expressive of the distinctive qualities of the relevant animals in one way or another. Used in the form of verbs, the animal-specific acts are metaphorically conveyed to the reader. “Verbs enhance the graphic effect of a description”^[1] (Translated by the author). A comparison between the English sentences with animal-specific wording and the Chinese versions without animal-specific wording highlights the subtlety from the perspective of expressiveness; the former undoubtedly strike the reader as graphically-portrayed while the latter are no more than a literary statement of facts or occurrences.

例5 He ducked and dived into the water.

译文 他一个猛子潜入水底。

例6 The path snakes through the valley.

译文 山道蜿蜒穿过峡谷。

例7 Those who fish for fame and honors will end up nowhere.

译文 沽名钓誉的人最后将一无所获。

例8 Parroting a theory is a far cry from what the practice requires.

译文 照搬一种理论决不等于就是实践。

例9 Passengers were sardined into the compartment of the subway.

译文 地铁车厢里到处都挤满乘客。

例10 The police hounded the criminal all the way to his home town.

译文 警察对罪犯穷追不舍,最后在他老家将其抓获。

例11 He wolfed down breakfast and darted to office.

译文 他一口气吃完早饭,然后飞奔办公室。

例12 He wormed himself into my confidence and betrayed me after that.

译文 他渐渐骗取了我的信任,但之后却出卖了我。

例 13 The onlookers craned their necks to have a better look.

译文 旁观者伸着脖子要看个究竟。

III. Animal-Specific Words Are More Succinct than Literary Statements

Many animal-specific words have metaphorical references. Therefore they are imbued with referential meanings. In this sense, the use of an animal-specific word is more than enough to put across a meaning which otherwise requires an explanatory statement. As “conciseness is a virtue in writing”^[2], the contrast based on the following pairs of sentences speaks volumes of the fact.

例 14 (1) Copycats are subject to severe punishment.

(2) Those who plagiarize are subject to severe punishment.

例 15 (1) The local discipline watchdog is probing into this case.

(2) The local department in charge of discipline inspection work is probing into the case.

例 16 (1) In the remote tribes of those days disputes were handled in kangaroo courts.

(2) In the remote tribes of those days disputes were handled in an unauthorized court without regard of justice.

例 17 (1) The newly-developed eco-friendly products are a cash cow to the company.

(2) The newly-developed eco-friendly products generate enormous profit margins to the company.

例 18 (1) He was a lame duck and was dismissed before his term expired.

(2) He was incompetence at administration and was dismissed before his term expired.

例 19 (1) The athlete turned out to be a dark horse in the match and shot to stardom overnight.

(2) The otherwise unknown athlete won the championship in the match and shot to stardom overnight.

例 20 (1) Steven was a black sheep in class.

(2) Steven was always making trouble in class.

例 21 (1) He always regards himself as a big

fish in the academic field and loses no chance to flaunt his learning.

(2) He always regards himself as some-one of great importance in the academic field and loses no chance to flaunt his learning.

例 22 (1) Couples who have gone through locust years have their bond cemented.

(2) Couples who have gone through the years of hardship have their bond cemented.

例 23 (1) Unless you are fit for the job, we will change horses promptly.

(2) Unless you are fit for the job, we will have you replaced promptly.

IV. The Animal-Specific Words Evoke the Image of a Specific Animal

According to Liu Miqing^[3] (Translated by the author), “Artistic language outperforms stative language”. Animal-specific expressions more often than not conjure up an image of the animal in the mind’s eye of the reader. The following Chinese sentences are rendered into English by drawing on the analogy between a human act and an animal’s behavior. The stark contrast shows that the latter outdoes the former in terms of image-evoking effect.

例 24 孩子径直朝学校走去。

译文 The kid made a beeline for the school.

例 25 本市经济跳跃式发展, 一季度国民生产总值以两位数增长。

译文 The economy of the city has taken a frog-leap and its GDP chalked up a two-digit growth in the first quarter.

例 26 在工作中炫耀自己不对, 而不正视自己的缺点也是错误的。

译文 It’s unwise to play the peacock in the work, but ill-advisable as well to adopt an ostrich policy.

例 27 他经常玩小聪明, 我得提防着点。

译文 He often plays the fox and I am to keep an eye open.

例 28 上海至威海的直线距离 980 公里。

译文 Shanghai is 980 km away from Weihai as

the crow flies.

例 29 整天照应两个一岁大的双胞胎可是个单调乏味的苦差事。

译文 It's simply donkeywork to baby-sit one-year-old twins the whole day.

例 30 汽车横着滑向马路一侧。

译文 The car skidded to a halt crabwise on the road.

例 31 我绝不容忍这样的恶作剧。

译文 I have zero tolerance of such monkey business.

例 32 他敏锐的眼光洞察秋毫。

译文 Nothing can elude his eagle-eyed observation.

例 33 船被大海汹涌的波涛掀翻了。

译文 The boat turned turtle in the choppy waves of the sea.

例 34 他的父母亲虽然很穷,但还是把五个孩子快乐、健康地养大成人。

译文 His parents were as poor as church mice and yet they managed to bring up five happy, healthy children.

V. Animal-Specific Expressions Sparkle with Wits and Wisdom

The English language abounds with idioms from a great many classical allusions. Their multitude is too great to be listed here. But a few illustrations of these allusions deriving from the classical sources drive home the fact. Among others, "swallow a camel" is based on Bible Matthew, quoted from "You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!" From this context, "swallow a camel" denotes "go through great tribulations"; "a dog in the manger" derives from an old Greek fable, referring to those who deliberately prevent others from having something which they themselves have no use for; "a bull in a china shop" harks back to a caricature about Lord Amherst's bungled trade mission to China in 1816. His rashness on the trip was figuratively likened to a bull dashing about in a porcelain shop.

Some animal-specific idioms seem to have self-

explanatory meanings. Thus the appropriate use of these idioms highlights the congruity between an idiom-related scenario and the real situation. For instance, "have ants in one's pants", "play cat and mouse with", "can the leopard change his spots?" etc never elude understanding to those who have common sense of the idiom-related situations.

Oddly enough, some animal-specific idioms have the same meanings though the animals are a far cry from each other in terms of nature. For one, "make a monkey of somebody" and "make a hare of somebody" are both the equivalent of playing a trick on somebody though the species of monkeys and hares are poles apart.

As animals vary from each other in terms of nature, the use of similes is a common practice in some relevant contexts. By doing so, the accuracy of a description fully manifests itself. Such idioms make a long list, such as "at a snail's pace", "as merry as a cricket", "like a lamb to the slaughter", "as fit as a flea; as proud as a peacock", "live like a fighting cock", "eat like a bird", "drink like a fish", "swim like a duck", etc. The adjectives associated with the nature of animals are commonly-used epithets, such as "chicken-hearted", "lion-hearted", "sheepish", "bearish", "bullish", etc.

The following English sentences are alive with wits and wisdom as opposed to the Chinese versions without animal-specific wording.

例 35 他在台上十分紧张,说话语无伦次,简直难堪透顶。

译文 He was nothing short of a hog in armor when he was seized with a terrible stage fright and spoke incoherently.

例 36 他为人极端吝啬,几乎没有朋友。

译文 He can skin a flea for its hide and has virtually no friends in his life.

例 37 约翰想吻玛丽,但她用几句讥诮话把他气走了。

译文 John tried to kiss Mary, but she sent him off with a flea in his ear.

例 38 那里的景色美不胜收,可美中不足的是游人太多。

译文 The beauty of the scenic spot was beyond

word, but it was packed with a sea of people—a fly in the ointment.

例 39 必须采取预警机制防止潜在的金融危机, 这决不是虚张声势。

译文 Proactive measures ought to be taken to forestall the looming economic downturn. We are not crying wolf.

例 40 这孩子对音乐就是不敢兴趣, 你强迫他一点也没用。

译文 The boy shows no interest in music. You are flogging a dead horse.

例 41 只许州官放火, 不许百姓点灯。

译文 One man may steal a horse, while another may not look over the hedge.

In the final analysis, the use of animal-specific idioms, if properly contextualized, enhances the vividness of an expression. On the contrary, if the

user “barks up the wrong tree”, what is conveyed will turn out to be “a horse of different color”, and even aesthetic effect of the text is diminished. As a rule, “aesthetic sense is fostered through much exposure and practice”^[4] (Translate by the author). It is true of the use of animal-specific wording. Only a master hand with a discerning eye can hit the “bull’s eye”.

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(编辑: 朱渭波)

◇ 简 讯 ◇

全国第五届“外教社杯”英语教学大赛在沪举行

今年第五届“外教社杯”全国英语教学大赛的参赛对象与往年有所不同, 第一、二、四届的参赛选手为大学英语公共课的教师, 第三届为英语专业课教师。第五届则改为全国职业院校的英语教师。

第五届教学大赛(上海地区复赛和决赛)于2014年5月24至25日在上海外语教育出版社的报告厅举行。参加复赛的有16所院校的16名代表, 参加决赛的有10名选手。经过激烈紧张的对抗, 冠军由上海立信会计学院的张鑫萍夺得。

决赛进行后, 由上海外文学会名誉会长卢思源教授代表评委会做点评。卢针对整个比赛过程以及名列前茅的几位选手的讲课特色进行了评述, 并以“作为一名优秀的外语教师”为题, 应如何提高其业务水平和语言应用能力谈了个人的观点。随后出版社社长庄智象教授对当前外语界现状和今后高职高专的发展形势做了具体的描述和精彩的分析。

最后, 卢思源教授和庄智象教授为上海立信会计学院的张鑫萍颁发了一等奖; 陈明娟和朱士昌教授为上海民航职业技术学院的刘珏和上海东海职业技术学院的牛晓伟颁发了二等奖; 周梦华、张益明、严筠、刘路喜、潘卫民和来自杭州师范大学外语学院的李颖等评委和教授颁发了三等奖。历时一天半的第五届上海赛区复赛和决赛圆满结束。