

A Comparative Study on the Differences Between Chinese and Korean Animal Proverbs and Their Teaching Methods

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Abstract

Proverbs are condensed expressions of a nation's language, culture, and collective experience, and animal proverbs in particular reflect culturally shared perceptions of nature, society, and human behavior. As China and Korea have long belonged to the Sinosphere and maintained close historical and cultural exchanges, Chinese and Korean animal proverbs exhibit considerable similarities in structure, rhetoric, and symbolic meaning. However, due to differences in geography, ways of life, social institutions, and psychological culture, clear divergences can also be found in their literal meanings, implied meanings, and pragmatic functions. From the perspectives of contrastive linguistics, cultural linguistics, and Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, this paper compares the similarities and differences between Chinese and Korean animal proverbs and analyzes the cultural factors underlying them. On this basis, it proposes several teaching strategies for Korean learners of Chinese, including level-based instruction, contextualized teaching, contrastive teaching, task-based teaching, and error-correction-oriented teaching. The study argues that the teaching of animal proverbs should not be limited to literal explanation; instead, semantic meaning, cultural imagery, and communicative function should be integrated so that learners can move from simple comprehension to appropriate use. Proverbs are not only important carriers of cultural education, but also effective resources for improving communicative competence and intercultural understanding in second-language teaching.

Keywords

Chinese-Korean comparison; animal proverbs; cultural differences; Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language; intercultural communication

1. Introduction

1.1 Research background

The progress of human society is attributed to the exchange and communication through language. Therefore, language has become a fundamental tool for daily communication among people, and the importance of language is even more prominent in communication between different countries (Mieder, 2004). Proverbs are an important component of national language and culture. They not only reflect social experience but also embody a nation's way of thinking and cultural values (Fang, 2016). China and South Korea, separated by the sea, have had frequent cultural exchanges since ancient times, sharing certain similarities at the cultural level. However, due to different geographical locations and historical reasons, there are still certain differences in the languages and scripts of the two countries. Moreover, they experienced a 40-year period without diplomatic relations after World War II. In 1992, the two countries reestablished diplomatic relations, further facilitating exchanges in economic

and cultural aspects. With the influence of the Korean Wave, there was a surge in learning Chinese in China. Similarly, with the development of China's economy, the importance of Chinese has been recognized, and Chinese has become a language that Koreans are keen to learn. In 2015, South Korea revised the "Language Education Curriculum Requirements," explicitly requiring students at all stages to focus on learning proverbs in order to strengthen their traditional cultural literacy and grasp of history. With the increasing emphasis on traditional culture, both China and South Korea are attaching greater importance to proverbs and further promoting the study of proverbs. Therefore, a comparative study of proverbs between China and South Korea is of great significance. From a teaching perspective, ancient China and Korea had close exchanges. Under the specific cultural nurture of the two countries, there are proverbs about animals that have been passed down. In these proverbs, animal imagery carries significant symbolic meaning. Different cultures often use animal characteristics as metaphors for human personality and social behavior (Liu, 2013). With the development of cross-cultural communication research, proverbs are gradually regarded as important linguistic resources for understanding cultural cognition and social values (Wu, 2019). Similarities can help people from the two countries understand the meaning of animal proverbs, but differences also lead to ambiguities and different interpretations of animal proverbs in the two countries, making them difficult to master. Therefore, it is hoped that comparing the differences between Chinese and Korean animal proverbs can help further improve language acquisition.

1.2 Research purpose and significance

Regarding the research on animal sayings between China and South Korea, it is generally conducted by comparing the differences in animal sayings. The meanings of animal sayings are diverse, not only representing their literal meanings but also conveying extended meanings. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the acquisition errors of animal sayings in the teaching process and the reasons behind these errors, so as to propose targeted improvement methods and promote the teaching of animal sayings. Therefore, a comparative study of Chinese and Korean animal sayings can effectively help people clarify the relationship between the two, thereby further improving the learning and mastery of animal sayings, and further enhancing language expression and comprehension abilities.

1.3 Review of research status

China and South Korea, separated by the sea, have had close interactions in history, and their historical and cultural backgrounds share many similarities. With the increase in research findings on Sino-Korean relations in recent years, both countries have recognized their historical roots. Existing studies have shown that animal metaphors are universal across different languages, but their cultural symbolic meanings often differ (Gu, 2016). Regarding the study of Chinese animal sayings, some scholars have analyzed the metaphorical meanings and cultural origins of animal imagery from a cognitive linguistic perspective (Xu, 2024). Korean scholars have also conducted systematic research on the cultural symbolism of Korean sayings, pointing out that animal imagery serves a distinct cultural metaphorical function in Korean sayings (Kim, 2017). Although there have been some research findings on the study of animal sayings between China and South Korea, certain issues still persist.

Firstly, the research on Chinese and Korean animal sayings is still insufficient. Based on the collation of relevant literature, it is still mainly focused on the comparison of animal sayings between the two countries.

Secondly, in the current research on animal sayings in China and South Korea, studies focusing on specific animals are still relatively scarce. Typically, research is conducted in the form of examples, and there is also a lack of deeper exploration into the study of specific

animals. The existing arguments are still insufficient, and the research content is not deep enough.

Once again, there is a lack of necessary in-depth exploration into the meanings of animal sayings in both China and South Korea, especially regarding the correlation between the two.

Finally, with the close interaction between Chinese and Korean international students, the structural characteristics of the relevant international student groups have not been fully taken into account in research content. Therefore, there is still a lack of practical basis for formulating relevant language teaching suggestions.

1.4 Research methods

This article comprehensively employs literature analysis, comparative analysis, and case analysis methods. Firstly, by obtaining relevant literature from CNKI, HSK Dynamic Composition Corpus, and other sources, we gain insights into the knowledge and works related to animal sayings in China and South Korea. We conduct corresponding research papers to acquire sufficient and rich materials as well as theoretical basis. Secondly, China compares the usage of animal sayings in cross-cultural communication between China and South Korea, analyzes the inherent differences and connections, and better grasps the essence and characteristics of language acquisition, which can better facilitate the teaching of new languages. Improvements in teaching methods can help students quickly grasp the semantics of animal sayings and the comparison between Chinese and Korean languages, making the teaching process more convenient and efficient, and enabling students to better learn animal sayings. Finally, based on the characteristics of animal sayings themselves, we continuously improve teaching strategies, enrich teaching methods, and create diversified teaching approaches, thereby creatively enhancing teaching design and ultimately helping students learn and master the usage of animal sayings

2. Similarities between Chinese and Korean animal sayings

2.1 Similarity at the formal level

In the similar animal sayings between China and South Korea, the similarity in form mainly manifests in the same structure and rhetorical methods. The same structure is one aspect of the similarity in form, which is mainly reflected in the similarities between Chinese and South Korean similar animal sayings in terms of simple sentences and complex sentences. The same rhetorical methods are another aspect of the similarity in form, which is mainly manifested in the three rhetorical devices of antithesis, hyperbole, and metaphor, all of which are identical. In terms of antithesis, it is a very important rhetorical device. Using words and sentences like antithesis can enhance the expressiveness of language, arouse people's curiosity, and leave a deep impression. Studies have found that in many languages, animals are often used to express evaluations of human behavior or social phenomena, and this metaphorical approach has strong cross-cultural universality (Senkbeil, 2020). For example, animal images such as "tiger" and "dog" have relatively stable symbolic meanings in both Chinese and Korean languages.

2.2 Similarity at the semantic level

In the similar animal sayings between China and South Korea, the underlying meanings expressed are consistent, such as in the case of the animal phoenix. The phoenix is a very special animal. In Chinese bird mythology, the phoenix has always been placed in the first position, corresponding to the dragon, and has always been symbolized as auspicious. The phoenix represents a prosperous and peaceful world. In Korean animal sayings, it is said that even if a chick tries hard, it will not become a phoenix. For the phoenix, it is an outstanding

creature, the best among its kind, while the chick is at the bottom rung and therefore cannot become an outstanding phoenix. This is similar to the meaning in Chinese.

3. The differences between Chinese and Korean animal sayings and their cultural reasons

3.1 Formal differences

The forms of animal sayings in China and South Korea differ. For example, in terms of structural form, the main difference lies in the fact that South Korea has phrase sayings, which China does not. However, South Korea's phrase sayings are similar to Chinese idioms, and there are certain differences between the two, such as "(a cow stepping into the slaughterhouse)" and "(a widowed mandarin duck)". Additionally, there are differences in the forms of modification methods. Both China and South Korea use rhetorical devices such as antithesis, but China has higher requirements for antithesis. Chinese animal sayings also use a more specific rhetorical method called "dengzhen" (literally "topping truth") in antithesis, such as the Chinese sayings "Don't touch the bug, and the bug won't bite your hand" and "Big fish eat small fish, and small fish eat shrimp".

3.2 Difference in meaning

There are some similarities between Chinese and Korean animal sayings, but more often than not, they differ in meaning. This difference in meaning manifests in two aspects: partial differences and complete differences. The meanings are partially different. Some Chinese and Korean proverbs share similarities in their surface and deep meanings, but due to the different cultural backgrounds of the two countries, differences in habits have resulted in distinct characteristics between them. The meanings are entirely different. Apart from sayings with partially different meanings, in terms of animal-related sayings, China and South Korea have completely different meanings for certain animal sayings. Sayings related to "donkey" are also involved in animal-related sayings in both China and South Korea. At the surface level, Chinese sayings related to "donkey" mainly highlight the donkey's ability to work, while South Korean sayings related to "donkey" mainly focus on the donkey's own characteristics, such as its large ears, and the fact that donkey meat can also be eaten.

3.3 Cultural reasons behind the differences

3.3.1 Material and cultural differences

Material culture refers to the physical entities created by humans, encompassing the labor force and labor achievements jointly produced by laborers, labor materials, and labor objects. Its concrete manifestations are seen in technology, architecture, transportation, and other physical objects. Proverbs are summaries of people's daily life experiences, closely related to people's daily activities, and serve as records of people's living conditions. In terms of material culture, there are mainly two aspects: transportation and diet, which shape the cultural backgrounds of Chinese and Korean animal proverbs.

3.3.2 Differences in institutional culture

Institutions are present in all aspects of social life, encompassing people's living habits and lifestyles, production and management, family organization and forms, education, health, and more. From the perspective of cultural linguistics, differences in proverbs often stem from differences in social institutions, lifestyles, and historical and cultural traditions (Kövecses, 2015). This article explores the background of the formation of animal proverbs in China and South Korea from the perspective of institutional culture. Ancient China experienced slave

society and feudal society, with the most recent being feudal society. After thousands of years of feudal society, it has always been based on agricultural economy, with a continuously strengthened absolute monarchy system. Feudal society has a very strong hierarchical system, with strict distinctions between ranks, so proverbs also reflect these institutional differences. Ancient Korea was also a feudal society, and it was a tributary state of China. The supreme ruler of Korea could not call himself emperor, but only king, which also illustrates the strict hierarchical system of feudal society. Korea has been relatively stable, with fewer wars and upheavals, but it is still ruled by a king, so proverbs are also related to hierarchy.

3.3.3 Psychocultural differences

Psychological culture encompasses people's ways of thinking, concepts, aesthetics, likes and dislikes, values, beliefs, and so on, existing at the spiritual level of people. It is formed through people's long-term life and practice. China and South Korea, separated by the sea, share very similar psychological cultures. Both China and South Korea are influenced by Confucian culture and have great similarities in education, etiquette, and public administration, with a particular emphasis on the golden mean attitude. The spirit of the golden mean is to maintain a moderate approach in dealing with people and situations, acting in a moderate manner to ensure that it is within a reasonable and reasonable range. Some studies have pointed out that the differences in evaluation meanings of animal proverbs between China and South Korea often reflect the different social and cultural values of the two countries ().

4. Teaching Insights and Methods from Chinese and Korean Animal Sayings

4.1 Teaching Principles

The teaching of animal idioms cannot be limited to literal interpretation. If teachers only explain what "horse," "dog," and "tiger" mean individually, without elucidating their cultural associations and usage contexts, learners are prone to the problem of "understanding the meaning but not being able to speak it." Existing research has pointed out that the teaching of idioms should simultaneously consider cultural understanding, grammatical meaning, and communicative function, enabling learners to judge when to use them, with whom to use them, and what tone to adopt in specific situations. In second language teaching, idioms not only help learners understand language and culture but also enhance their communicative abilities (Dabaghi et al., 2010).

4.2 Comparative teaching method

For Korean learners, one of the most effective methods is comparative teaching between Chinese and Korean. Teachers can juxtapose idioms containing the same animal imagery in both languages and explain their surface meaning, deep meaning, and applicable context separately. For example, "dog" may carry a negative connotation in both languages, but the specific evaluation focus is different; "tiger" can both represent ferocity and danger, but the narrative color in Korean is stronger. Through comparison, learners are not only more likely to remember, but also easier to discover misuses that may result from mother tongue transfer. Research on Chinese idiom teaching for Korean learners has proven that comparative teaching can effectively help learners establish cross-linguistic correspondence.

4.3 Contextualized teaching method

Research indicates that combining contrastive teaching with contextual teaching can effectively enhance learners' understanding and application of idioms (Jang, 2020). Idioms are highly context-dependent, so teaching should avoid isolated explanations as much as possible and place idioms in specific contexts such as character dialogues, short text readings, film

clips, and classroom discussions. Teachers can design situational tasks, such as "comforting a friend," "evaluating others' behavior," "expressing persuasion," "telling folk stories," etc., for students to determine which idiom is more appropriate. This not only enhances memory but also helps students grasp tone and register restrictions. Research shows that combining idiom teaching with communicative functions is more conducive to learners' actual output.

4.4 Error analysis method

When Korean learners study Chinese animal idioms, their common errors mainly fall into three categories: first, literal translation, neglecting the extended meaning; second, mechanical correspondence with Korean idioms, leading to the distortion of positive and negative connotations; third, arbitrary application without considering context, resulting in unnatural expressions. To address these issues, teachers can employ methods such as "correct and incorrect analysis", "comparison of synonymous idioms", and "analysis of Sino-Korean mistranslation cases" to enable students to actively discover differences and correct errors. Research on idiom teaching has pointed out that error correction must be based on communicative function and cultural explanation; otherwise, it can only correct forms and is difficult to truly improve usage ability.

5. Conclusion

Chinese and Korean animal sayings share commonalities as well as individual characteristics. The commonalities primarily stem from the long-term exchanges between the two countries in history, agricultural social experiences, and the East Asian cultural background; whereas the differences primarily arise from the variations in geographical environment, material life, institutional structure, and psychological culture. Because of this, animal sayings are not only linguistic phenomena but also cultural phenomena. Their complexity in form, symbolism, and pragmatics determines their high value and difficulty in second language teaching.

For Korean learners, the teaching of Chinese animal sayings should be based on comparative analysis, utilize contextual teaching as a pathway, and aim at communicative function. Only by combining "semantic explanation", "cultural explanation", "pragmatic training", and "error correction" can learners' understanding and application abilities of sayings be truly improved. Future research can further incorporate learner questionnaires, textbook analysis, and classroom experiments to verify the actual effects of different teaching methods.

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