

Contrastive Analysis of “Dog” Expressions in English and Persian

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This study is based on corpora of animal expressions in English and Persian. In this study, “dog” expressions are examined based on Hsieh’s (2006) approach of semantic molecules to explore the salient meanings and the cultural backgrounds. Animal expressions may reveal people’s thoughts, emotions, cultures and customs. The analysis of about 10,000 English and Persian proverbs shows that there are 97 English and 207 Persian “dog” expressions. In spite of cultural and social differences between English and Persian, the salient semantic properties derived from the name of this animal are nearly the same. The main semantic molecules of the word “dog” are “worthless, bad-tempered, cruel, violent” in both English and Persian.

Keywords: proverbs, animal metaphors, semantic molecules, animal expressions, salient content

Introduction

The present study is within semantic-pragmatic framework. Over the years, there has been an interest in research about metaphors, idioms and proverbs within different frameworks, but studies on animal expressions are few. Animal expressions are part of a language which contain at least one animal name and refer to the animal itself or human being, and will develop along with the time and with the society. Some of the collected metaphors are seldom used nowadays and instead some new metaphors are invented and added to a language because of the social and technical developments. Since the beginning of the history, human beings live close to animals and this make people know animals (especially domestic animals) well, and attribute negative, inferior human characters to animals, and through animal expressions we can see how people of every society observe and describe animals and this may help to understand or reveal culture backgrounds and differences, in fact human languages express the thoughts of human beings, and develop from the culture and society. By using animal metaphors we can reflect how we think about others, about human relations, and how we assess our society. Animal expressions are useful devices for supporting different human purposes such as insulting, praising, criticizing and describing humans, societies, cultures and customs.

“Dog” expressions play an important role for the English and Persian, because dog is a popular animal in both cultures and has a close relation to people. So, because of human familiarity with this animal, they use it frequently in their language expressions. “Dog” name is the second frequent animal name used in Persian animal expressions, although there are a lot of cultural and social differences between English and Persian, the semantic contents raised from the name of this animal are somehow similar. In this paper, we will reveal some

of the dog expressions in both languages and will discuss the primary and secondary semantic molecules of them in order to compare these expressions in English and Persian to find differences and similarities.

Review of Literature

Below gives a review of some linguistic researches on animal expressions:

Fraser (1981, pp. 435-441) examined insulting animal expressions in different languages other than English to see if they have equal usages;

Newmark (1988, pp. 125-147) believed that animal metaphors are used to a great extent in order to describe inferior or undesirable human habits and attributes;

Davies and Bentahila (1989, pp. 49-68) examined animal terms in British English and Moroccan Arabic. They used different theories like similarity and relevance to categorize animal metaphors;

Holmes (1992, as cited in Hsieh, 2006) gave examples of the “chicken” metaphor in her sociolinguistic analysis of sexism in language;

Sutton (1995, as cited in Hsieh, 2006) studied linguistic discrimination against females and made a strong argument about the metaphor “women are animals”;

Tomita (2000, pp. 1-15) worked on a large amount of rhetorical expressions, such as animal similes and metaphors, which are used to delineate the physical appearances or distinctive personalities of various characters in Charles Dickens’s novels;

Nadim (2000, pp. 291-299) examined animal roles in Shirazi proverbs with an approach to sociolinguistics. After analyzing about 100 animal expressions, he concluded that “donkey” expressions are the most frequent ones and have some salient semantic molecules, such as “crazy, worthless and absurd”;

Hsieh (2001, as cited in Hsieh, 2006) studied animal expressions in Mandarin Chinese and German based on Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) conceptual metaphors;

Hsieh (2004, as cited in Hsieh, 2006) further proposed that “animal expressions are our vocabulary of values”;

Hsieh (2006, pp. 2206-2220) investigated animal expressions in Mandarin Chinese and German. With a focus on “cat” and “tiger” expressions, he revealed the salient semantic molecules of these animals in both languages.

Research Framework

In this study, animal expression means any English or Persian expression which contains at least one animal name. “Dog” expressions will be used as the primary examples in the first part of the analysis in order to reveal the semantic molecules of animal expressions. Animal names are considered as metaphorical vehicles here, and most of the data are collected from the written English and Persian dictionaries of proverbs or idioms. Part of the raw data are taken from daily-life conversations. Among written and spoken animal expressions about 304 (English: 97, Persian: 207) are “dog” expressions.

Hsieh (2006, p. 2209) suggested that “In a word, the meaning of an animal word in our mental lexicon contains the components from the animal’s nature, habitat, behavior, appearance, and human-animal relation”. The following section will extract and analyze the semantic molecules of “dog” expressions. Semantic molecules refer to primitive semantic features, which are supported by linguistic evidence like proverbs.

“Dog” Expressions and Semantic Molecules

In this part, some of the semantic molecules of “dog” expressions are exemplified, and then the authors will discuss and compare the salient molecules in both English and Persian.

Dog

In spite of cultural and ideological differences between English and Persian, the semantic molecules of “dog” expressions are somehow similar in both languages. In Islam dog is an unclean animal, and this belief is revealed in some Persian proverbs which are few and only about seven of 207 “dog” expressions, for example:

- Example 1: (1) سگ به هفت دریا پاک نشود (Literal Translation¹: not be cleaned sea seven in dog) (English Translation: Dog is unclean even if be cleaned in seven seas);
- (2) خون سگ شوم است (LT: is ominous dog’s blood) (ET: Dog’s blood is ominous);
- (3) از لف لف سگ دریا نجس نشود (LT: be not uncleaned sea dog’s barking of) (ET: sea will not be dirty of dog’s barking);
- (4) سگ که به آب تر شود، پلیدتر شود (LT: becomes dirtier, be wet water from when dog) (ET: when the dog is wet, becomes dirtier). In English, this belief is not accepted and just one proverb is found with this semantic molecule;
- (5) دریا به دهن سگ نجس کی گردد؟ (LT: become when unclean dog of mouse from sea) (ET: the sea is never dirty with the dog’s mouse?), “He that washes an ass’s head, loses both his soap and his labour”. In Persian instead of “ass”, “dog” is used;
- (6) سگ به دریای هفت گانه بشوی/ که چو شستی پلیدتر باشد (LT: dog in sea seven wash/that when you wash dirtier becomes) (ET: If you wash dog in seven seas, it becomes dirtier).

Another semantic molecules for “dog” expressions in both languages are “worthless”, for example:

- Example 2: (1) شیر مرده به که سگ زنده (LT: alive dog than better dead lion) (ET: the dead lion is better than an alive dog);
- (2) سگ سگ است، ارچه پاسبان باش (LT: be keeper although, is dog dog) (ET: dog is a dog although it is a keeper) = “cut off the dog’s tail, he remains a dog”;
- (3) سگ با قلاده زرین هم سگ است (LT: is dog even golden collar with dog) (ET: dog is a dog even with a golden collar) = “A dog is a dog whatever his colour”;
- (4) آواز سگان کم نکند رزق گدا را (LT: beggar’s food will not decrease dog’s barking) (ET: The dog’s barking will not decrease the beggar’s food);
- (5) سگ لاید و کاروان گذرد (LT: goes caravan and barks dog): (ET: Dogs bark, but the caravan goes on) = “The dog bays the moon”;
- (6) خدا نصیب گرگ بیابان نکند (LT: God want wolf’s desert not) (ET: should not happen to a dog) = “God helps that it won’t happen to a wolf”;
- (7) آدم گرسنه سنگ را هم می خورد (LT: eat even stone hungry man) (ET: hungry man will eat even stone) = “Hungry dogs will eat dirty pudding”, “cruel and violent” and making a lot of noise.

Other semantic molecules are revealed in English and Persian, for example:

- Example 3: (1) پارس آن سگ از گاز گرفتنش بدتر است (LT: is worse his bite than dog that barking) (ET: the dog’s bark is worse than his bite) = “His bark is worse than his bite”;

¹ LT should be read from right to left.

- (2) پا روی دم سگ نگذار (LT: do not put dog tail on foot) (ET: do not stand on the dog's tail) = "let sleeping dogs lie", "Treading on dog's tail";
- (3) با وحشی کسی که انس گیرد / هم عادت وحشیان پذیرد (LT: with violent who that familiar becomes/habit violent people will take) (ET: He that becomes familiar with violent people, becomes violent) = "He that lies down with dogs must rise up with fleas";
- (4) سگ گزنده همان به که آشنا باشد. (LT: be familiar that better biting dog) = "It is better to be friends with the biting dogs".

There are some English and Persian. Proverbs which contain "loyalty" for dog expressions, for example:

- Example 4: (1) سگ حق شناس به از آدمی ناسپاس (LT: ungrateful man than better grateful dog) = "A grateful dog is better than an ungrateful man";
- (2) سگ از مردم مردم آزار به (LT: better inhumane people than dog) = "The dog is superior to a man who upsets others";
- (3) وفاداری را از سگ باید آموخت (LT: learn should dog from loyalty) = "loyalty should be learned from the dog";
- (4) سگ حق شناس به از آدمی ناسپاس. (LT: ungrateful man than better grateful dog) = "A loyal dog is better than an ungrateful man";
- (5) سگ وفا دارد ندارد زن وفا! (LT: loyalty woman does not have has loyalty dog) (ET: The dog is loyal, but not the women);
- (6) سگ به وقت وفا به از نا کس (LT: man than better loyalty time to dog) (ET: dog in need is more loyal than man).

"Dog" expressions contain the opposite semantic molecule "ungrateful" too, in both languages, for example:

- Example 5: (1) سگ رفیق استخوان است (LT: is stone friend dog): (ET: Dog is friend with bone) = "Dogs wag their tails, not for you, but for your bread";
- (2) دهن سگ همیشه باز است (LT: is open always dog mouse) (ET: The dog's mouse is always open);
- (3) سگ سیر سرکش است (LT: is unruly fed dog) (ET: fed dog becomes unruly);
- (4) سگ خویش گرسنه دار تا از دنبال تو آید (LT: you follow to keep hungry your dog) (ET: Keep your dog hungry to obey you) = "If you save a rouge from the gallows, he will rob you that same night";
- (5) سگ که سیر شد دنبال آدم نمی آید (LT: does not follow man is fed when dog);
- (6) کمترک انداز سگ را استخوان (LT: Bone to dog give less);
- (7) سگ را که چاق کنند هار می شود (LT: become rabid make fat they that dog);
- (8) سگ را که گنده کنی بچه ات را می درد. (LT: kill your child grow dog) = "if you feed your dog, becomes violent and kill your child".

As seen in the present proverbs, the same and unique content is shown in form of different proverbs in different languages. The number of dog expressions in Persian is more than English, but the conveyed semantic molecules are nearly the same in both languages.

"Dog" expressions may have other secondary semantic molecules, such as, "vagrancy and wandering" that exists only in Persian.

Example 6: (1) بسکه هرزه دویدم (LT: in vain running from says he get old you why ask they dog to) (ET: ask the dog why you get old? He answers because of running in vain);

(2) به سگ گفتند چطور شد کدخدا شدی؟ گفت از دوندگی‌های بیجا (LT: in vain running from says become you headman how ask they dog to) (ET: ask the dog how do you become the head man? He answers because of trying in vain).

“Disobedient”

Example 7: (1) تا نباشد چوب تر، فرمان نبرد گاو و خ (LT: donkey and cow do not obey, wet stick without) (ET: there should be stick to make cow and donkey obey) = “It’s the raised stick that makes the dog obey”;

(2) سگ را به زور به شکار نتوان بر (LT: take can not hunting to force with dog) (ET: you can not force the dog to hunting) = “one can not take a dog on a hunt by force”.

“Crazy”

Example 8: سگ در سایه دیوار راه می‌رفت گمان می‌کرد سایه خود اوست (LT: his own shadow thinks walks wall shadow in dog) (ET: dog walks in the shadow of wall and thinks it is his own shadow)

“angry”

Example 9: روی سگش بالا آمدن (LT: come up his dog face) (ET: his face becomes like a dog) which means to become very angry in English: “To go one’s goat”.

“Inattention”

Example 10: محل سگ هم به کسی نگذاشتن (LT: do not pay a person to dog heed) (ET: to treat someone less than dog) = “to treat some body like a piece of dirt”.

“Shameless/Rude”

Example 11: در مسجد باز است حیای سگ کجا رفته (LT: is where dog shame, is open mosque door) (ET: The mosque’s door is open, where is the dog’s shame?!) = “It is the masque’s door, can not be pulled nor burnt”.

“Regret”

Example 12: مثل سگ پشیمان شدن (LT: be regret dog like) (ET: to be regret like a dog) = “To regret very much”.

“Miserable”

Example 13: (1) فلک زده شدن (LT: become miserable) (ET: to become miserable = “to go to the dogs”);
(2) زندگی سگی داشتن (LT: have doggish life) (ET: to have a life like a dog) = “He leads a dog’s life”.

Table 1

The Semantic Molecules of Dog in English and Persian

Language	Vehicle	Semantic molecules
English and Persian	Dog	(1) Salient English and Persian semantic molecules: violent, cruel, worthless, unclean, loyalty, ungrateful
		(2) Secondary English and Persian semantic molecules: miserable, disobedient
Persian	سگ /sag/	(3) Secondary Persian semantic molecules: inattention, angry, crazy, wandering, vagrancy, regret, shameless, rude

Conclusions

As it is revealed in Table 1, “dog” evokes more molecules in Persian than in English and it is also much more productive in Persian. While the dog is one of the most popular pet in English, but it is an unclean animal in Iranian culture.

Animal expressions refer to undesirable characteristics and traits of man and low, inferior aspects of human life, so most of them carry negative connotations. There is only one proverb which seems to be positive but it is not used to praise people, “مثل سگ کار کردن” (LT: work dog like) (ET: to work like a dog), yet to praise people in the form of proverbs. Hsieh (2006, p. 2216) believed that names of domestic animals and pets are used for women, and names of wild animals for men.

Traditional notions show themselves in the form of proverbs. In other words, proverbs like other linguistic vehicles are the reflection of speakers’ views, cultures, beliefs, social behaviors and roles, so animal expressions can reveal the individual or social thoughts.

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