Animal Metaphors in English and Korean: Analysis and Connotation

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Sungchool Im. 2008. Animal Metaphors in English and Korean: Analysis and Connotation. The Journal of Linguistic Science 46, 83-100. This paper undertakes a study of animal metaphors in English and Korean with a view to investigating the nature of animal metaphors and finding out their connotations in each language by a cross-cultural comparison of those metaphors. The animal metaphors show different connotations for men and women in English: for women, in general, a negative connotation but for men both positive and negative connotations. In contrast, the great majority of animal metaphors in Korean express negative connotations. It was also found that there are sexual differences and different connotations for the same animal between English and Korean.

Key words: animal metaphor, conventionalized, cross-cultural, and connotation

1. Introduction

It is very common that words denoting wild animals and domestic animals are used in conventional figurative language (Dobrovol’skij and Pirainen 2005: 323). This figurative language is usually expressed in terms of metaphor and simile. For instance, consider the following examples in English:

(1) a. John is a lion.
    b. John is like a lion.
The first example is the case of metaphor and the second the case of simile. Despite the different figures of speech in the examples above, the two express almost the same meaning: John is an important, powerful, or famous person. According to Glucksberg (2001), “metaphors are implicit similes”. In this view, a metaphor is easily transformed into a simile without any substantive difference in meaning between the two.

Typically the connotations of animal metaphors used for the description of men and women have to do with the positive or negative attitudes people have towards other people. For example, if we feel disposed to think badly of someone, we tend to use the words of animals with negative connotations (e.g., an unreliable person may be called a rat). In contrast, if we feel disposed to think well of someone, we may use the words of animals with positive connotations (e.g., a powerful, important, or famous celebrity may be called a lion).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the nature of animal metaphors in the ordinary language of two typologically different languages - English and Korean, and find out their connotations in each language by making a cross-cultural comparison of those metaphors. In this study, six animals used for metaphors were chosen from English and Korean, respectively: dog/bitch, fox, wolf, rat, bear, and lion (in English)/tiger (in Korean).

This paper is organized as the following: Section two outlines two theories on metaphor: conceptual metaphor theory and blending theory, Section 3 analyzes the animal metaphors in English and Korean and compares the connotations of animal metaphors in each language, and finally Section 4 concludes this study.